# Feminist Africa

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## Violence, Gender, Power

## The Politics of Feminist Research Methodologies

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

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

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*Feminist Africa* produces three issues per annum in accordance with themes specified in the calls for contributions.

The editorial and production team can be contacted at contact@feministafrica.net. General enquiries can be sent to info@feministafrica.net


## Acknowledgements

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# Editorial

# Violence, Gender, Power – The Politics of Feminist Research Methodologies

**Charmaine Pereira and Jane Bennett**

The theorisation of exploitative and dangerous systems such as patriarchy or colonialism has long been energised by the complex and evolving connections among gender, violence, and power. Research and activism that acknowledge such connections point to ways in which these systems often create normalised conditions of vulnerability, especially for people gendered within the "feminine." Such theorisation has arisen most influentially in political work within civil societies that prioritises narratives of "abuse against women" as a starting point for redress, resistance, and revolution. The overwhelming focus on such abuses in African contexts has remained, however, on domestic violence and sexual assault. In the past decade, the focus has also increasingly included the narratives of people gendered as women who are caught up in conditions of war and refugeehood. At the same time, the political worlds in which, for example, Ellen Kuzwayo wrote *Call Me Woman* (1985, published midway through South Africa's State of Emergency), or Nawal El Saadawi published her best-known book, *Woman at Point Zero* (1975 in Beirut),[1] have changed dramatically. Both books explore the multiple and interlaced abuses of women by husbands/fathers and state systems, but the narration of such interlocked abuses cannot be assumed to be the most insightful lenses for contexts some 50 years later.

It is safe to say in 2025 that notions of what "gendering" might involve have been radically deepened and re-organised through multiple debates. These later notions would be unrecognisable within the gender dynamics experienced by Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero*, whose murder of her pimp led to her incarceration. Firdaus, for example, does not

experience how an inhospitable state might deploy social media against her, nor does she find synergies between events in her life and what might be happening in the lives of those experiencing sexual transactions outside the commerce of women paid (or not) for men's sexual gratification. Such deepening inevitably requires interrogating the connections between processes of becoming gendered and questions of power, and remaining vigilant about the categorisation and borderings of experiences as "violent." In 2025, African feminisms are as attuned to the capacity of digital technologies to create violent conditions of labour, in which gender dynamics are implicated, as they are to the possibilities of gross and state-tolerated assassinations of people living counter-heteronormatively. "Violence" has always been a difficult word, especially given projects of legislation and justice explicitly connected in post-colonial flag democracies with the prevention of violence against citizens, and in view of the need to redress historical violences. The integration of gendered dynamics into these projects seems to suggest that violence is exceptional even when historical context has not been considered, or sometimes, that "non-violence" is unrealisable.

In late 2022, *Feminist Africa* began a research project on 'Violence, Gender, and Power' with an explicit interest in renewing questions of the links among these terms in African feminist research. This has prompted questions such as:

- How are feminists theorising the links between structural inequalities and forms of violence against women in specific state contexts where people gendered in counter-heteronormative ways resist state regimes publicly?
- How do discourses that limit approaches to becoming gendered continue to circulate and retain power within popular and institutional space? How are such discourses resisted?
- How do feminists who are working to resist violence in institutional spaces – such as the law, religion, or education – become active in their commitment to feminist epistemologies and practices?
- How can we develop counter-hegemonic research approaches to understanding gender?

- From perspectives within African feminisms, how could we imagine methodology as a critical political process with regard to gender, violence, and power?

This project, which has included collective workshops for research participants, the encouragement of research created by teamwork, and individual support to researchers in whatever ways might arise, was intended to produce two journal issues between 2025 and 2026. This first journal issue concentrates on questions of knowledge creation, where the dynamics of violence, gender, and power circulate in multiple dimensions. It asks how methodologies themselves should and can be imagined in research spaces where great pain, vulnerability, and simultaneous resistance are experienced.

This editorial introduces the issue in three sections. The first offers some summary notes on the theorisation of violence, gender, and power. It is followed by a section that explores what it might mean to think of methodology as political feminist process, especially in relation to doing feminist research on issues of violence. The third section maps the feature articles, standpoints, in conversation and review contributions, and suggests editorial perspectives on the significance of the collation. Such perspectives are necessarily limited, and it is our hope that they will be read, challenged, and discussed by *Feminist Africa*'s readership.

## *Notes on thinking gender, power, and violence*

> Women, there is a common denominator in your lives: phallocratic violence. It is this violence which makes you think that you don't amount to anything on your own, without the other, the one who has got "something between his legs," the one with the phallus… This insidious, misogynous violence can, like a monster, present itself in different disguises. […] This violence is the daily lot of all oppressed women throughout the world, whatever they may do. Illiterate or intellectual, none of them escape. It is not a metaphysical violence; it is real and concrete. It can be not only brutal but also subtle. However, this male violence remains, as distinct from revolutionary violence, the violence of a system of slavery, which desires the domination of the other, the woman. In this sense, it is a form of terrorism. (Thiam 1986, 123)

Written in 1978,[2] nearly half a century ago, Awa Thiam's ferocious analysis of the medusa-like "monster" interested in the annihilation of people gendered as women strikes one as simultaneously magnificent and theoretically weak in its emphasis on phallocratic violence. Thiam's analysis was deeply embedded in a very particular moment of writing, such as that by Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral on anti-colonial and anti-imperial revolutionary struggles for Africa's transformation. Meanwhile, the assumption that women suffered "common oppression" by patriarchy, proffered predominantly by white feminists in the global North (e.g., Morgan 1984), ignored unequal global relations and the implications of multiple structures of power for women elsewhere in the world, including Africa. Thiam's writing wrestled with African women's vulnerability to the nexus of violence, gender, and power, and presented her Africa-focused theorisation as revolutionary. The fury, the essentialisms, and the demand for a revolution (Thiam's title for the source of the quotation) assume specific meanings for the terms *gender*, *violence*, and *power*. There is a causal logic at play: "gender" systems entail the presence or absence of "something between your legs"; such systems **cause** intensive and "concrete" suffering for those without access to phallic resonance, in the form of "violence," especially within the home – a terrorism, a slavery. Thiam saw this violence as an anti-revolutionary force in an era when the concept of the revolutionary still evoked Cabral, Senghor, or Machel, all of whom approached black women's power seriously. Machel went so far as to say that "the liberation of women is a necessity for women" (in the same year that Thiam's book was published). For Thiam, the connections among gender, power, and violence which render all "women" subject to forms of oppression (her words) are precisely those that any actual revolution for African freedom must, with vehemence, renounce.

Forty-seven years later, the language and hopes of revolutionary men (indeed, people) about socialist and independent modes of economic and cultural dynamics possible for African countries have, for the most part, been eviscerated by ever-evolving forms of capital. The most recent of these is financial capitalism. Many new/digital forms of assault are largely untrackable due to density, interconnectivity, and constant evolution. It is now no longer possible to see the "something between your legs" as implacably and uniquely

responsible for the multiple forms of assault against human *being* in which gendered dynamics, amongst others, are implicated.

A unidimensional theorisation of the relationship among gender, power, and violence – which understands violences experienced by women as more than likely to be due to patriarchal norms, discourses, and practices – has been overwhelmingly attractive due to its simplicity, capacity to universalise, and cross-contextual application. In a presentation at a South African conference on religion, gender, and violence, one of us drew on the work of the American white working-class lesbian, Andrea Dworkin, a writer/activist located very far from the context. Dworkin gave a talk at a men's conference in 1984, in which she asked the mostly masculine audience for a "truce:" 24 hours without rape. Dworkin's invocation in the South African presentation had been intended as a minor step on the way to a discussion of how to imagine futures, but the response was so overwhelmingly strong (applause, ululation, requests for the words to be repeated, a chant developed on the spot out of Dworkin's words) that the whole panel session was disrupted. At the time, this reaction seemed extraordinary: the contextual differences between Dworkin and the audience of young, mostly black, South African women relishing her words were immense. But the participants were responding to the notion that "men," by the power they accrued through their gendering, formed one terrifying/sexually violent cohort of abusers.

Such a clear conviction is always troubled by the presence of loved sons, transmen, fathers, sexual partners, friends or other masculine beings who do not conform to the patriarchal norm. Yet this conviction is the purest logic at the heart of survivorship after sexual/domestic assault from (nearly always) a "man." Such a logic creates rage, courage, movements, and solidarities defiant of a connection among gender, violence, and power experienced by unquantifiable numbers of people, in which it is predominantly men who are the perpetrators of violence and women who are the targets.

A considerable amount of feminist scholarship has pointed to the colonial inventions of race as an epistemological, economic, and political weapon (Gqola 2015; Tamale 2020; Okech 2020; Kessi and Boonzaier 2018). Feminist analyses of violence and power impelled by this recognition

have long insisted on theorising the vulnerability of "women" to "men" as deeply embedded in the dynamics of racialised conditions of labour in African (and other) contexts. In a recent essay, Lyn Ossome argues that,

> for feminist political theorists, a fundamental problem lies in the fact that it is practically impossible to think of ethnicity separately from its articulations in gender, class, race, sexuality, and so on. This is the gendered legacy of the colonial mode of incorporation of natives. It is a legacy of violence and brutality that had been the primary force that made the incorporation of natives into the state itself possible. (2024, 54)

Locating colonial violence in the formation of "natives", the post-colonial state can be deemed to be rooted in structural violences, which (one could extrapolate) makes contemporary connections among violence, gender, and power inextricably bound up with post-20th century dynamics of extractivism, financial capitalism, and state corruption. There are, however, critical differences in the modalities of colonial settlements across time. For centuries prior to European-dominated colonialisms, Islam shaped practices of governance, the creation of social norms, and ways of understanding the human in many African contexts.

In some recent threads of African feminism, decoloniality has been explored as an approach towards an analysis of epistemologies, institutions, state formations, and "cultural traditions". Such approaches highlight the persistent influences of colonial systems on African-based thinking. This exploration has included engagement with the work of Maria Lugones (2016), an Argentinian philosopher, which suggests that concepts of gendering, as binary, hierarchical, and immutable, are part and parcel of colonial approaches to being human. For activists and researchers, this approach may offer an exciting way of engaging "gender-based violence" as discursive and embodied acts of deliberate, often sexual harm that are not predictable through notions of "men" and "women". Instead, they become fluid, all pervasive, and mutable as invested moves towards the rekindling of colonialities in multiple ways. To "fight rape," therefore, to put things more simply, is, within this paradigm, to resist neoliberal and extractivist (the development of capitalist colonialisms of the 18th and 19th centuries) notions of human living.

Decolonial theory thus brings to questions of violence, gender, and power, formidable challenges about what we understand by gender, how we categorise "violences", and what strategies we devise to condemn and resist these, collectively. Historically, in vast areas of Africa, European colonialisms have had, and continue to have, much less influence on questions of the modern state, labour systems, and human identity than did powerful, ancient, and globally interlinked Muslim cosmologies, militarisms, and economies. Decolonial theory tends to sidestep this ordinary fact. Instead, "the religious" is simply relegated to an adjunct of the colonial, thus rehearsing notions of the secular which simply do not serve, analytically, to grasp the gendered realities of diverse African citizens (or African struggles for citizenship).

Fatou Sow (2018), writing on gender and fundamentalisms, points out that notions of the appropriately feminine are deeply situated within Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism). These notions constitute generative ground for the emotional and discursive construction of surveillance over gender identities. Within fundamentalisms, this construction, termed "religious," may flow into powerful technologies for the making of "women", bound to servitude, and "men", who command obedience. Sow argues that such fundamentalisms renew the dynamics of gender in a material way: funds flow towards the institutionalisation of a contemporary masculinity which may evoke "ancient teaching" but actually thrives within contemporary neoliberal economies. Sow's theorisation of the conversation between gender, violence, and power thus refuses the relegation of "religion" to a sphere separable from the contemporary, showing how a fundamentalism is birthed from within and sustains the state's desire for "women" whose labour is readily extracted, especially in the reproductive sphere.

As issue editors, our interest in designing a research space in which the interplay among violence, gender, and power could be opened up beyond the conventional (although important) focus on domestic violence, trafficking, and rape, led us to acknowledge that theorisations of this interplay are multiple, and sometimes destabilising. They include the need to constantly re-define "violence" – which can span actions as different as cyberstalking and wage-labour under coercive conditions – or to visualise the simultaneity of such diverse forms of attack on people gendered as women. But perhaps the most destabilising, for the majority of African feminists, comes from the

interrogation of gendering in and of itself. Lugones may have theorised conventional notions of gendering as colonial (and therefore violent). Yet, it is the sustained, intricate, and often so beautiful narratives of people living "outside" conventional gendered/sexual norms in African contexts that have rendered notions of rigid "masculinity/femininity" too vacuous for any profound commitment to human/social liberation.

A very wide set of ideas about how to imagine violence, embodiment, sexuality, and solidarities has been created by activism and allied research/writing that centres the experiences of people unrecognised within state-legal-religious frameworks of how "manhood" and "womanhood" should work and be put to work. There are at least two core challenges to much of African feminism arising from this work. The first is that the possibility of including the experiences of "queer" African-based thinkers, activists, and indeed people, within "feminist" analyses of gender as a "minority" – an umbrella group whose knowledges of violence matter – simply *extends* feminists' grasp of how state, economic, and political violences can constitute themselves. This kind of extension-practice – of merely "adding" the insights of those living counter-heteronormatively to well-worn understandings of violence – leaves the feminisms involved rooted in their own binary-based theorisation and simultaneously compounds the multiple legal, social, and political hostilities shown widely towards counter-heteronormative life/lives.

The second challenge is allied to the first: some of the most profound and influential thinkers and activists within African feminist work have engaged essentialist concepts of "women" and "men" without reflection on the (perhaps contextual) motivation to choose this approach as a way of understanding gender. Others, of course, have not done so – one thinks of Sylvia Tamale, Jessica Horn, Hope Chigudu, Asanda Benya, and many more. African feminisms therefore span a range of positions on the value of thinking beyond the binary, but this range is rarely named, let alone explored, placing renowned writers and activists, who are very differently positioned in terms of their engagement with counter-heteronormativity, side-by-side within projects that celebrate African feminists and their work. One side-effect is the likelihood that those theorising and strategising against binary-infused

concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality are not likely to turn to African feminisms as ready partners in critical solidarities – this is a loss.

For this *Feminist Africa* project, we were open, as issue editors and facilitators of research support to project participants, to listening to experiences and allied theorisations of violence, gender, and power that emerged from the contexts that researchers choose to explore. The histories of feminist responses to a vast array of potential violences are so rich, complex, saturated with debate, and infused with courage, that "a single story" would be not only reductive but impossible. This section's "Notes" function as a background to research writers' interest in the project, but in no way seeks to contain it.

## *Methodology as political feminist process*

How can one engage in feminist research on gender and violence in ways that acknowledge the complexities of power relations in research enquiries, the methodologies adopted, and the challenges faced in feminist research processes? This question lies at the heart of this issue of *Feminist Africa*.

> A key challenge for African feminists remains the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which we live and work, and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action. Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its own right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers and writers. (Bennett 2008, 1)

Feminist approaches that acknowledge the inevitability of inequalities of power among research participants, research producers, and users of feminist research in this field are central to the overall project, as is the recognition that there is a vast difference between actual experience and the modalities with which we negotiate to represent such experience. This is always an exercise in partial failure – no images or words can replace or renew "experience" as it occurs. The representations themselves are intimately political. Theorising the politics of research methodologies has meant for us describing and analysing such experiences, that is, acknowledging and addressing disparities of power

explicitly. For researchers, this entailed examining, in a granular manner, how power relations were configured in their various modes of producing feminist knowledge about gender and violence.

Recognising violence within a given situation entails drawing on feminist scholarship that theorises how meaning is embedded in the contextual dimensions of knowledge. This process refers to questions such as what is understood or recognised as knowledge, i.e. the domain of feminist epistemology and methodologies. Feminist epistemology highlights the intimate relationship between theory and methodology – how researchers theorise dimensions of violence, gender, and power has implications for their methodological approach. What methodologies have been used, by whom, and with what effects? Countering received approaches to knowledge production, such as positivism or even "progressive" social science that is nevertheless masculinist, may take the form of critique or of asking counterfactual questions, for example, what would scholarship on Africa look like if African feminist knowledge were to be taken seriously (Pereira 2002)? A researcher may ask what theories of knowledge – positivist or social constructivist or some other – have been used in researching gendered violence.

Feminist objectivity – unlike the "scientific" objectivity of positivism – is necessarily partial, not neutral, makes clear its positionality, and acknowledges accountability for the knowledge produced (Haraway 1988; Bhavnani 1993). This raises the question of what accountabilities, and to whom, specific methodological choices uphold. Feminist researchers generally view their accountability for their methodological choices, to those who are the focus of research, as part of the political process. This accountability also involves being clear about the limitations of methodologies. Only by producing knowledge in a manner that is accountable to the assumptions of the research can its methodology be considered ethical (Bhavnani 1993). Accountability also applies to questions of access to the research and circulation of the knowledge produced. With whom, and how, will the knowledge be shared?

The geographical, historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural context in which the research is being carried out is a second aspect of

contextualisation (see e.g., Mampane 2022; Cunha and Casimiro 2021; Okech 2020; Mupotsa 2011). These features shape national, regional, continental, and international conditions and circumstances affecting the dynamics of gender, such as whether conflict or warfare is ongoing or how "peace" may be experienced by feminised persons. Multiple authority sources – state, religious, community, and family – will have their own approach to histories of work on gendered violence in a specific context. There may be a range of work within women's organisations and civil society more generally that addresses gender and violence, each with its own focus and priorities. There is the larger question of language and, in multilingual contexts, how any given language refers to issues of sexuality, violence in public and domestic spaces, and the specificities of visibility and denial regarding gendered violence (see e.g., Chilisa and Ntseane 2010). This complexity underscores different dimensions of the question of which assumptions need revisiting in any new research project.

The positioning of the researcher is a critical feature of feminist research. Whose gaze does the research rely on – an outsider's, within or outside? An insider's, within or outside? A whole spectrum of placements could be implicated. These questions highlight some of the ways in which feminist researchers treat positionality, that is, how the researcher is positioned in relation to the research theme (Mampane 2022; Undie 2007; Pereira 2005; Morsy 1988). Positionality has often been treated as synonymous with intersectionality, influenced by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) use of the term to refer to the differential treatment of women by the US legal system, depending on their racialisation as "white" or 'black," with black women facing greater burdens than white. Power was forced to flow in intersecting ways through categories of "identity," specifically race and gender. From a different perspective, positionality has been treated as centrally addressing power relations, *not* identity (Bhavnani 1993). Thus, what is important for the researcher to highlight are the power dynamics – overt and covert – inherent in the research process. This entails reflection on multiple layers of power relations – what features make the researcher powerful, or conversely, relatively powerless in particular research encounters. Avoiding the reinscription of prevailing powerlessness is a key feature of feminist research practices (Bhavnani 1993), which requires engaging with

the micropolitics of research relationships. Reflexivity is paramount here, including engagement with the research process as a means of documenting its subjective aspects, such as the decisions taken at each stage (see e.g., Mohlakoana-Mosala 2013).

Given the complexities in any specific location, researching gendered violence gives rise to political questions concerning the alignment of the researcher's study with previous and/or existing work. If the study is very different from existing work, will the research be considered suspect, and if so, how should the researcher address this issue? How will a researcher understand and deal with a context in which the dynamics of gender and violence are expressed in unfamiliar ways? How does the researcher deal with questions of difference? Choosing which feminist methodology to use in researching gendered violence requires a reckoning with the histories of influence of research in that field. Numerous questions arise concerning representation and legitimacy. Which kinds of representation – quantitative, qualitative – are valued and seen as more worthy of receiving resources? What is "legitimacy" with regard to feminist research methodologies? Some of the issues concerned include how the terrain has already been researched, which methodologies are considered authoritative in a particular context, and how the knowledge generated will be represented. Treating research methodology as feminist political process requires, among other things, analysis of which bodies of literature are viewed as important, relevant, or even necessary. Whose voices should be brought into the research process? Referencing and citation involve conscious political choices. Awino Okech (2020) highlights the significance of African feminist epistemic communities and the opportunities for reflection provided by instances of apparent failure in the course of research.

Internationally, there is considerable concern over gendered violence, its pervasiveness and increased visibility in certain circumstances, particularly during conflict. The call for quantification – the production of "data" on gendered violence – is loud in policy circles such as United Nations Women (see e.g., Maina and Rooney 2024). The World Health Organization maintains a Global Database on the Prevalence of Violence Against Women.[3] The lack of "data" is seen as critical by policy actors and activists working to shape responses to gendered violence. While no doubt useful and important

in many respects, however, the emphasis on quantification does not necessarily illuminate how the "data" are constituted. What is being counted, using what methods and to what end? What is being left out? At its heart, quantification presumes the use of categories and/or occurrences of gendered violence and the possibility of counting such categories in a relatively straightforward manner. It also assumes that deciphering the meaning of responses to questions involving such categories is uncomplicated.

Recognising that research on gendered violence entails a commitment to surfacing the experiences of those who have been targets of violence is a deeply political process, one that entails recognition of multilayered complexity, affect, embodiment, and relationalities. Whose experiences and voices will the research address? Which actors enable the telling of the story of the research and which actors are invisibilised? Enabling survivors to find words for traumatising experiences that they may not fully grasp themselves is both painful and demanding. The notion that the import of experiences of violence can even be conveyed in a direct manner assumes that language, any language, is capable of such representation. This is quite apart from the multiple impacts that experiences of trauma may have on survivors' ability to speak. How does a researcher build trust, support the sharing of stories, enable research participants to exercise "voice" in the research process, and open up space for new voices? Questions such as these are integral to reflections on the feminist political processes entailed in researching survivors' experiences of violence.

> Each survivor's journey is a unique tapestry of trauma, resilience, and survival, making it imperative to move beyond statistical data and delve into the qualitative dimensions of their experiences. While quantitative data provides valuable insights into the prevalence and patterns of GBV, it often falls short in capturing the rich complexity of survivors' lived experiences… (Diab and Al-Azzeh 2024, 3)

The process of listening to survivors' experiences of violence gives rise to multiple ethical conundrums for feminist researchers. What, for example, are the implications for survivors of trying to speak about their own experiences of violation? Where do they begin, and where do they end? Will they be believed? Ethical guidelines are generally treated in media handbooks in terms of recommendations to prioritise safety and minimise risk; protect the rights

of survivors; ensure informed consent on their part; and safeguard privacy, anonymity and confidentiality during the reporting process (e.g., Impe 2019). While a number of these guidelines, such as prioritising safety, minimising risk, and supporting survivors' rights also apply to situations in which feminist researchers take listening to survivors seriously, the ethical conundrums that researchers are faced with tend to present themselves as less clear-cut.

The notion of informed consent is complicated in contexts of insecurity when much of the potential fallout from telling the story might be unpredictable. The context in which a survivor tells her story is likely to affect how believable she is seen to be, with the legal process manifesting multiple modes of eroding a survivor's credibility (see e.g., Bennett 2013). How risk might be minimised in research situations will vary for survivors, researchers, and family members. From their experience of carrying out large-scale surveys of gender-based violence in South Africa and Zimbabwe, Rachel Jewkes et al. (2000) point to a range of ethical issues in this domain. The fact of carrying out research on gender-based violence in itself exposes researchers and research participants to violence. Respondents as well as researchers face the risk of being traumatised as a result of recounting violent experiences, and researchers' own relationships are often affected by the impact of carrying out research on violence (Jewkes et al. 2000).

A critical ethical issue concerns how to create conditions for survivors to recount their stories in ways that do not entrench feelings of hopelessness or representations of victimhood. Using methodologies such as life stories enables feminist researchers to avoid "ideologically polarised discussions on victimhood and agency," as in the case of sex work (Guha 2019, 505). In settings of chronic insecurity, creating a safe social space for giving testimony, preserving memories, and contesting impunity provides new ways of listening to and learning from survivors (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). Highlighting the resistance of girls and women to gendered oppression and violence is another way of using feminist research to counter notions of victimhood. The use of context-specific and indigenous methodologies can provide a researcher with the opportunity to act ethically in a healing capacity by "allow[ing] research participants to name and share pain and to collectively

envision strategies for resistance, resilience and survival" (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010, 629).

## *Violence, gender, and power: feminist praxes for research*

This issue of *Feminist Africa* collates a range of writing by scholars within our research collective, and all contributions grapple with methodological considerations as political and theoretical issues. Most of the authors will also share their work in another issue of *Feminist Africa* (planned for late 2026). In some ways, it is unusual to publish research devoted solely to peer reviewed writing on the politics of the methodologies used; as editors, we chose to do this for two reasons. Firstly, our project demanded that we find a way to build a cohort of thinkers and researchers, each team working with very different contexts and issues, so that immediate discussions could be held about dilemmas and difficulties that we all faced as feminist researchers. The politics of methodologies was an obvious focus, and moreover, one with which all project participants resonated. Secondly, the length limitations for peer reviewed contributions in *Feminist Africa* (and many other scholarly journals) tends to preclude in-depth reflections on questions of methodology as theory. And yet, as glossed in the previous section, feminist epistemologies are profoundly rooted in the analysis of methodologies. In much knowledge-making that is responsible for the erasure, stigmatisation, and/or hypersurveillance of people constrained under gender dynamics, it has been the methodology adopted that has caused more damage than the "assertion of a new 'fact'".

In this issue, Feature articles explore, from a range of perspectives, the politics of qualitative methodologies drawn upon by researchers with very different research foci. Stella Nyanzi and Annah Ashaba are both Ugandan feminist political activists who have very directly confronted the Museveni regime and been violently targeted by the state. They begin their exploration of the violence faced by women political fighters by invoking the potential – and danger – of "a conversation," a cry for empathy and support from a fellow exile. The notion of conversation as an implacable call into thinking through the holographic and often perilous processes of listening with and for women in political exile offers a powerful starting point for the journal. The

interest in "conversations" expands through Ruth Nekura's article on how feminist litigators, who work in the hostile and narrow waters of legal languages and argument, build an organic and intellectual solidarity with one another. Nekura suggests that "conversation" can be engaged as a research methodology whose contours are shaped by both ethical boundaries and a strong commitment to feminists working together where actual work-zones – courts, engagement with clients, aggressive counter-advocacies – may well seek to separate litigators from one another.

Enzo Lenine and Naentrem Sanca's research interests lie in the ways in which violence against women in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau conveys "messaging" that normalises connections between gender and power, which lead to women's vulnerability. The researchers explore the delicacy, political nuances, and complexity of creating conversations with multiple interlocutors. Their Feature article reflects on the ways in which positionalities loop, sometimes along untrackable paths, both towards and away from their own capacity to make sense of the dialogues they have with survivors, researchers, government officials, civil society organisation workers, and others. As with the contributions by Nyanzi and Ashaba, and by Nekura, Lenine and Sanca's article is fully alert to the mesh of pain, surprise, anger, and anxiety woven by research attuned to matters of violence. Lenine and Sanca simultaneously tackle the methodological question of how a hegemonic discipline (in this case, International Relations) can erase or marginalise what violence may mean once gender dynamics are taken seriously.

Nora Noralla's Feature article thinks through the narratives of transpeople living in Egypt, where the need to live gendered in a way not predicted by birth sex-identity is highly pathologised in both religious and popular discourse, and access to medically supported transition is non-existent, legally. She is explicit that her interest is not in questions of her own positionality (although she knows the area as an "insider"), but rather that her commitment is to the representation of the experiences of those she encounters in her research journey. Doing so without reducing such representation to "data" requires the presentation of detailed context for the stories, and the desire, on her part, to step away from any authorial limelight. Noralla's essay is the first trans-focused research to be included in a collation of Feature articles in *Feminist Africa*. We are very happy to have Noralla's

Feature in this issue and we hope for a strengthening of the commitment demonstrated by *Feminist Africa* to theorisations of gender that centre the experiences of people erased by binary models.

The mapping of contemporary thinking on the multiple linkages among violence, gender, and power continues in a Conversation and two Standpoint essays. Mpumulelo Zamakuhle Zulu discusses the politics of research with non-governmental organisation (NGO) queer activists Katleho Mahlobo, Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose, and Katlego Chibamba. "We are Not Just Data Sources!" is longer than most *Feminist Africa* In Conversation submissions and includes wide-ranging and sharp thought on the ways in which NGO-based researchers get positioned as "lesser" than university-based ones, and how knowledges derived from the work undertaken by NGOs are rarely foregrounded as "theory." The contribution carries a wealth of arguments about the need to explode notions that stories are "data". This concern is also explored by Blessing Hodzi and Yvonne Phiri in a Standpoint essay that traces their own movement from people culturally taught to be wary of women with disabilities to becoming researcher activists who focus on violences endured by women with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

The questions of "insider/outsiderhood" that Hodzi and Phiri raise are also tackled in Eugenia Anderson's Standpoint essay about possibilities for researching intimate partner violence experienced by women of faith within different Christian-based churches. As she explains, pastorship often recommends that pastors themselves should be the ones to give counsel and support to the women affected – who are not encouraged to use the police or NGO services in reporting their abuse. Anderson argues that being simultaneously an "insider" and an "outsider" afforded her some power and a route to investigate this challenge. She writes as both a woman of faith and a feminist who is critical of theologies that consider domestic violence against women to fall within a husband's right. Although the voices and foci in the Standpoints and In Conversation are distinct, as editors we discern a compelling collation of questions about methodologies that arise from a passionate commitment to justice and from solidly engaged and invested life-work within the particular settings explored by contributors.

Three books are reviewed in this issue: Françoise Vergès' *A Feminist Theory of Violence*, by Charmaine Pereira; Annie Bunting, Allen Kiconco, and Joel Quirk's edited anthology *Research As More than Extraction*, by Margo Okazawa-Rey; and Imbolo Mbue's second novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, by Jane Bennett. It was difficult for us as editors to make choices of material to review from many possible pieces of writing. Those we selected seemed to complement the ideas highlighted through the issue: the complexity of imagining "violence" where gender and power are concerned. Where does it end? From where did it begin? What must we do, and how must we "be" in the face of what we have lived and come to know about such violence? How do we erase its futures? Then there is the salience of understanding the ways in which knowledges are collated, worked with, and how they change us as feminists in African contexts. Along the way, we would like to further the possibility of forging communities of writers and thinkers, accessible to more than ourselves.

The final contribution in the issue is Dzodzi Tsikata's tribute to Everjoice Win, who travelled into ancestry on 9 March 2025. Win was a woman so well-known continentally for her wit, presence, leadership, and generosity with African feminisms that her name, "EJ," was for some synonymous with everything integral, joyful, and deeply human about the movement itself. Tsikata's tribute glosses the very wide range of organisations and initiatives with which EJ was associated and the huge esteem in which she was held. This issue of *Feminist Africa* focuses on the work of very difficult research, and as several articles describe, this entails pain, sometimes confusion and a sense of not knowing where one is going. Those who worked with EJ never had that sense: she inspired, she offered purpose and hope in her ways of being and her ways of working. It feels very important to "end" this issue with a memory of EJ to ensure that feminist solidarities and the threads moving between so many different feminists, in time and context, in language and emotion, here in life and in death, can sustain so much.

## Notes

1. *Woman at Point* Zero was first published in English in 1983 by Zed Books.

2. Awa Thiam's *La Parole Aux Negresses* was only translated into English in 1986.
3. https://vaw-data.srhr.org/

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# Studying Political Violence with Ugandan Women: A Feminist Methodological Exploration

**Stella Nyanzi and Annah Ashaba**

## Abstract

We explore the benefits and challenges of undertaking feminist methodologies to investigate the polarised topic of gendered political violence in contemporary Uganda. Drawing from mixed methods research that triangulated key informant interviews with autoethnography, media content analysis and literature review, we analyse components of the research process. We reflexively examine the power of transgenerational feminist collaboration enabled by our shared exclusion in exile, combined with an enabling African feminist intellectual community. Feminist research methodologies are pertinent to a nuanced understanding of the growing paradox of Uganda's escalating political violence against women and gender minorities amidst widely praised affirmative action. African feminist ethos complicates and challenges normative adherence to principles of research ethics. Feminist methodologies give voice and power to individuals and communities that are ordinarily silenced and erased from traditional academic research.

**Keywords:** feminist methodologies, Uganda, political violence, violence against women

## Introduction: The Intricacies of Feminist Research Methodologies

On the chilly morning of 8 March 2023, a phone call from Nana Mw'Afrika[1] interrupted my reverie on the ICE train to Darmstadt.

"Nalongo[2] Stella, I'm so very broken," she said shakily.

"What is the problem, Nalongo Nana?" I asked.

"I'm shivering all over. I'm breaking with pain," she replied.

"How can I help? What is wrong?" I asked again.

"Can you believe what I found on the TV just now? Can you imagine that the senior police officer who ordered those rough policewomen to beat me up and shove a baton up my womb when I was heavily pregnant is being decorated and celebrated here in Kiruhura District as our country commemorates International Women's Day? I cannot… I cannot…" she said, between controlled sobs transmitted across thousands of miles.

"Oh no, Nalongo Nana," I said, unsure how to respond.

"My eyes are frozen on the television screen. I'm standing with the remote control in my hands. I cannot bring myself to switch off the vulgar scenes unfolding before me, right here in my sitting room. My whole body started shaking uncontrollably as soon as I realised what I was watching. I'm in shock, Stella. I don't know what to do. I don't know… I don't know…" she repeated.

"Listen, Nalongo Nana," I told my friend after a frozen moment. "Perhaps you should first switch off your television, or at least switch to another channel," I suggested.

"Alright. Let me switch this thing off. But can you imagine the injustice?" she asked.

"First switch off the television," I repeated. "And then find a place to sit down."

After a brief pause, I heard her shuffling her feet.

"I have sat down here with my back to the television. But I'm shaking badly. It is unbelievable that many years after my physical and psychological trauma at the hands of Uganda's serving police officers, my body can still respond so powerfully from the memories resurrected by seeing this woman's promotion. Eh, Nalongo Stella, I'm afraid," she said.

"I am so sorry that you are experiencing this on our day – International Women's Day," I remarked, ironically.

"You see? These International Women's Days mean different things to different women. This brutal senior policewoman is being celebrated by the state using millions of our public funds. But she is being recognised and rewarded for brutalising women protesters who merely exercise our constitutional rights to hold peaceful demonstrations. Millions upon millions of Ugandan taxpayers' monies are being poured into this useless function, yet many young girls still miss school because of lack of sanitary pads, and many poor women still die during childbirth because of poor reproductive health services," she ranted, as we commonly did in our routine phone calls.

"I had not even realised it is International Women's Day because I am travelling to our main office for an official meeting with the administrators of my scholarship, as well as staff members of PEN Zentrum Deutschland. So, I will celebrate our day by working," I said.

"Actually, I called you about that research interview you have been trying to do with me. I'm now more than ready to make time to speak out about the political violence that I and other women in Uganda have suffered under the public servants and soldiers paid using our taxes. I want to do the interview as soon as possible. I'm no longer hesitating. This pain that arises in the most unexpected moments is no longer acceptable. I must speak up and speak out," Nalongo Nana said with resolute determination.

"This is very good news, Nana," I replied.

"Yes, I feel so much better by deciding to break the ice and address the issue of my biggest shame, failure and punishment by the Ugandan state," she said.

"Alright, Nana, when can we have our interview?" I asked cautiously.

We scheduled an online interview which became the first of several repeat-interviews conducted during our research study. We discussed Nana's participation as a key informant in our ongoing research.

Drawn from the vast empirical material produced from our feminist research processes, this unplanned interaction between a researcher and a potential research participant highlights several interconnected and integral components of feminist research methodologies. These include (1) collaborative and continuous conceptualisation of the multifarious phenomenon of political violence, (2) the indisputable categorisation of

women as not only traumatised victims of political violence but also as active participants in hierarchies that brutalise other women, (3) a clear reversal of roles from a helpless victim of political violence to an agentic actor who decides to address her psychosomatic symptoms of trauma through finding a voice for her story of pain and determining the vehicle through which to reclaim her power and healing, (4) the openness and sensitivity of a researcher to what initially presented as an unscheduled interruption but later became a rare jewel in which a previously elusive potential research subject voluntarily consented to participate in the research, (5) negotiation and navigation of power–powerlessness whereby the research participant expected answers and solutions from the researcher perceived as "expert," but the latter actively listened and thus returned power to the research participant to reach her autonomous solution, (6) the ability of ethnographic fieldwork to generate thick descriptions about socio-political contexts, and (7) the raw emotions of brokenness and pain freely expressed within the confines of research. This long list from a single (and singular) phone conversation highlights the intricate complexity, multi-layeredness, nuance, intertextuality and density contained within the label "feminist research."[3] These attributes are particularly feminist because of their ability to (re)configure power between individuals within the research encounter, i.e. researchers' power is neutralised and shared with their participants who are conceived as collaborators and not mere subjects. In addition, in the process of research, normative victims take charge, actively convert their powerlessness into agency and create meaningful solutions from their vantage point. Furthermore, women are homogeneously portrayed not only as recipients but also as potential perpetrators of violence against other women. Feminist research encourages openness towards diverse emotions and emotionality (of both researcher and researched) as productive sources from which to generate research questions and results. This openness allows for the unstructured conduct of interviews and flexibility of the research cycle.

In this article,[4] we describe and examine our experiences of deploying feminist research methodology to explore the multifaceted topic of gendered political violence and thereby theorise about building resistance to it in Uganda. Drawing on the feminist principle of reflexivity about power and powerlessness entailed in academic research processes, relations and

products, we critically interrogate benefits and challenges of research procedures, cross-generational team building, our positionalities, emergent ethical dilemmas, shifting power differentials between the researchers and the researched, sampling and access to research participants, interviewing individuals about their experiences of political violence, analysing embodied trauma and relying on the public and social media archive for materials to enrich our triangulation. The article has five sections. After examining the rationale for focusing on feminist research methodologies, we analyse the dynamics of effectively building a feminist research team comprising two mobile individuals of different generations who live in different countries of exile removed from the study location. Thereafter, we critically examine the challenges of negotiating ethical review in a repressive society. We then analyse sampling criteria that permit research participants to contribute towards the identification of others. Finally, we discuss the power of undertaking feminist research methodologies.

## The Rationale of Writing Entirely About Feminist Research Methodologies

Just as there is no consensus about divergent multiple forms of feminism (Dosekun 2021; Ahikire 2014; Mama 2011; Kiguwa 2004; Tong 1989), there is no agreement about a singular universal definition of feminist research methodologies (Kiguwa 2019, 224; Webb 1993). However, from a close reading of the literature, it is possible to hazard an organic[5] conceptual definition such as the one adopted in our research. We present our working definitions of African feminism and feminist research methodologies.

While we are cognisant of the diverse nuances of African feminism that form an ideological force powering our productivity, we embrace a zygotic conceptualisation that fuses Josephine Ahikire's (2014, 7) assertion that "in African contexts, feminism is at once philosophical, experiential and practical," with Gwendolyn Mikell's (1995, 405) emphasis on "a feminism that is political, pragmatic, reflexive and group oriented," along with Sylvia Tamale's (2006) appeal for more political engagement, theorisation, radicalism and innovation. Accordingly, our research logic was informed by Amina Mama's (2011, e9) framing that "feminism refers to a movement

tradition of women's organising that is broadly non-hierarchical, participatory and democratic, promoting egalitarian institutional cultures characterised by an ethos of respect and solidarity between women." For us, feminist research methodologies offer a major departure from traditional research methodology whose limitations lead to failures to comprehensively grasp the vast complicated flexible intersectional and often contradictory lived experiences of women and gender minorities who are relatively underrepresented in processes and products of academic knowledge production.

> Feminist methodology is the approach to research that has been developed in response to concerns by feminist scholars about the limits of traditional methodology in capturing the experiences of women and others who have been marginalised in academic research… [It] includes a wide range of methods, approaches and research strategies (Naples 2007, 574).

Our approach further relies on Mama's (2011, e11) call for criticism rather than an uncritical acceptance of women's movements. She states:

> … feminist research approaches can be developed through a politics of critical engagement with activism, using scholarly resources (feminist theoretical tools, modes of analysis, historical experience, etc.) that reach beyond the immediacies of a given local gender relations and struggles to enable reflection and deepen understanding.

Why devote an entire publication to **just methodology**? Firstly, while seemingly banal, this is a common question, particularly because academic practice has long routinised relegating discussions of research methods to a relatively small section after the introduction. The bulk of academic writing is devoted to presentation, analysis and interpretation of research findings. Normatively, there is a relative paucity of scholarly research attention and knowledge production about the processes and politics of methodologies deployed when undertaking research, let alone feminist research methodologies. Stanley's (1990, 12)[6] appeal for a feminist praxis in the academy urges us "to focus on the details of the research production process, for it is this that is a comparative rarity in academic feminist published work."

Secondly, devoting greater attention to research processes through which feminist knowledge is produced facilitates the analysis of power (and powerlessness) embedded within diverse research relationships. Choices about thematic focus, research subjects, interview structure, questions,

completeness of responses, data interpretation, what is valued as knowledge, among others, are political decisions negotiated during research interactions. Decisions by research participants about whether or not to participate entirely in all research components, what details to divulge, whether or not to trust a researcher with private or sensitive information and even the extent of sharing corroborating evidence, are made in relation to power. Naples (2007, 548) calls for "a holistic approach that includes greater attention to the knowledge production process and the role of the researcher." This ultimately enhances researcher reflexivity. It offers a more transparent account of how the researcher's framing determines what is perceived as knowledge. Thus, the research process becomes part of the research products. Gune and Manuel (2007) further engage with the politics of researcher–researched exchange(s) in the knowledge production processes specific to sexualities in Africa.

Thirdly, in her reflexive criticism of the challenges and weaknesses of African feminism, Sylvia Tamale (2006, 39–40) highlights gaps between feminist theory and praxis. She states:

> Feminists in the African academy and the activist practitioners on the ground tend to operate in separate cocoons. Gender equality and women's rights rhetoric hardly spreads beyond the legal landscape... When feminist theory does not speak to gender activism and when the latter does not inform the former, the unfortunate result is a half-baked and truncated feminism. Under-theorized praxis is comparable to groping in the dark in search of a coffee bean. It leads to "obscurantism," hindering clear vision, knowledge, progress and enlightenment.

A commitment to bringing the work of African feminists in the universities into closer dialogue with those in the women's movement, scholarship and activism and to linking ideas together with practice "would strengthen and reradicalise both feminist theory and feminist practice" (Mama 2011, e9). To address this gap between feminist theorising and feminist activism, as well as draw from our combined mixed positionalities as not only scholars and activists, but also poets and engaged political actors, we purposefully chose to theorise from our lived realities and the everyday experiences of Ugandan women and gender minorities with whom we lived in proximity. Thus, our feminist methodology, which is hinged upon the need to address this gap between theory and praxis, led to our overall research aim of generating a grounded theory[7] (Strauss and Corbin 1994) about resisting political violence

in contemporary Uganda. Grounded theory aims to generate emic theories from data collected from research participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967), rather than to prove existent grand theories.

Fourthly, clearly outlining and analysing the research methods, data analysis and interpretive frameworks of a study is a prerequisite for research transparency, particularly in research based on qualitative and interpretive approaches (Moravcsik 2019). In some respects, transparency is to qualitative research what replicability is to quantitative research. It enables reviewers to assess the rigour with which conclusions and abstractions were derived from the collected data and analysis.

Lastly, there is the benefit of theorising from and about Uganda specifically and Africa more broadly, thereby growing the body of African feminist knowledge founded upon such nuanced analyses.

## Research Timing, Proposal Development, Design and Methods

The timing of *Feminist Africa's*[8] call for proposals serendipitously coincided with the first author's renewed quest for feminist affiliations that foster mentorship, collegiality and academic productivity.[9] She was resuming her career as a knowledge producer straddling multiple genres (Nyanzi 2023) after fleeing from a tumultuous season in Uganda. This period included indefinite suspensions from Makerere University's Institute of Social Research, a 16-month sentence in a maximum-security prison, a failed political campaign in Uganda's 2021 national elections for the position of Kampala Woman Member of Parliament, an application for asylum in Kenya, and ultimately relocation to Germany on a scholarship offered by the Writers-in-Exile programme of PEN Zentrum Deutschland. Freshly exiled, she was attracted to the call for proposals for several reasons: (1) important overlaps between the consortium's[10] theme and her personal investment in interrogating political violence among women and gender minorities in Uganda specifically and Africa generally; (2) the 36-month timeline, which she deemed adequate for rigorous research and meaningful knowledge production; (3) the flexibility of community availed through belonging to a research consortium that bypassed red-tape bureaucracies within academic

institutions;[11] (4) a research grant worth US$6,000[12]; (5) the possibility of contributing towards the feminist work ethos of *Feminist Africa*; and (6) the opportunity to produce academic publications.

Consequently, she developed a research proposal[13] to examine the paradox of increasing economic and political violence against diversely gendered women at different frontlines in Uganda, on the one hand, and the disproportionately scanty scholarly attention to the subject relative to other forms of violence (including sexual violence, gender-based violence, domestic violence and intimate partner violence) on the other. Although global trends analyses (e.g., Krook 2018, 2017) reveal increasing gendered political violence, comparatively much more research is conducted in the global North than the global South, specifically Mona Lena Krook's comparative analyses and conceptualisation of *Violence Against Women in Politics* (Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016). Our broad research project addresses these two research problems by examining experiences of gendered political violence in Uganda. Its two objectives are to generate grounded theories about gendered political violence and build emic models of grassroots support for African feminist resistance to political violence against women and gender minorities.[14]

Using mixed research methods (Boonzaier and Shefer 2006), we triangulated qualitative[15] individual in-depth interviews with autoethnography (Ellis 2004; Chang 2016), content analysis of public media and social media[16] and literature review. Using convenience and purposive sampling techniques (Chittaranjan 2021), we identified twenty key informants for repeat-interviews about their experiences of political violence in Uganda and any resistance they or others developed in response. From this preliminary sample, snowball sampling techniques (Noy 2008) facilitated the identification of support sources and resistors[17] against the political violence individuals experienced. Media content analysis (Krippendorff 2018; Markoff et al. 1975) generated comparative materials about the chronology of events, actors, actions, processes, redress mechanisms and support networks for juxtaposition with key informants' reported narratives. Individual reports and media content were supplemented with autoethnographic materials from the researchers and a review of academic publications and grey literature.

Triangulation of methods and materials enhanced the rigour, veracity and accuracy of our research.

## Team Building and Feminist Collaboration Across Generations

Initially working alone, building a research team became imperative after a situational analysis of political events in the study context, an assessment of requisite intellectual and manual labour, a cost-benefit analysis of collaboration, the practical realities of exile and a financial review of available resources. Consequently, with the approval of the research consortium convener, the first author invited the second author to join the research team.

Who are the two co-researchers? What qualifications did they bring to the research? What are their compatibilities as research team members? What are their similarities and differences? How do their contrasts influence the team's work dynamics? What are their individual roles? What are their politics of collaboration? What challenges and dilemmas arose in team-building processes? How does collaboration shape underlying principles and assumptions of feminist research? These questions explore researchers' roles in determining the quality and quantity of academic research generated using feminist research methodologies.

Our positionalities arise from our education, experiences, expertise and exposure. Annah Ashaba is a Ugandan cisgender woman in her mid-twenties, single and has no children. She is a Roman Catholic, a Mukiga from Rukungiri in Western Uganda, and she is fluent in Runyakitara languages.[18] She is a member of Uganda's opposition political party called the Forum for Democratic Change. When the research began, she had just started her graduate studies on an online distance learning programme at the University of Edinburgh. She had also fled Uganda into exile and now lives in Ghana, having previously lived as an exile in more than two other countries. Stella Nyanzi is a Ugandan cisgender woman aged 50, a single mother to three teenagers and a Protestant formerly married to a Muslim man. She is a Muganda from Masaka in Central Uganda, fluent in Luganda and a member of the Forum for Democratic Change. She is an exile in Germany.

While our demographic profiles present differences of generation, geography, ethnicity, religion and local language, we share commonalities of Ugandan nationality, graduate education, political party affiliation, exile and African feminist ideology, politics and praxis. We are both social constructionists who believe that all knowledge is situated and subjective (Haraway 2016). As knowledge producers, we have varying insider-outsider proximity in our research participants' communities. Far from detached objective observers of the phenomena we research, we are engaged socio-political actors seeking social transformation (Naples 2007, 548) to improve the prospects of gendered involvement in politics in Uganda specifically and Africa generally. For us, knowledge is political. Undoubtedly, this research is political because it offers feminist resistance against widespread silencing about gendered political violence.

Both[19, 20] of us are artistic and academic knowledge producers straddling diverse genres. Our writings led to repeated political persecution and penalisation. However, rather than allow our dehumanisation from political violence to perpetually silence and shame us, this research empowered us to draw productive energy from our combined reservoirs of pain and trauma to mobilise other Ugandan citizens to recraft similar negative experiences into feminist knowledge. Thus, through this research, we refashioned forms of literary justice as alternatives to judicial systems that let us down. Rather than shun our dehumanisation, we jointly revisited it with other victims and survivors to collectively theorise our gendered experiences of contemporary political violence in Uganda. This is political resistance through feminist knowledge generation. Our research is at once academic, personal, communal and political. Each of us established a record[21] of feminist praxis. Given our experiences as recipients and sources of support and resistance against gendered political violence, autoethnography was the most relevant data collection method.

Based on our research positionalities, we assume complementary roles and responsibilities. Each of us leads in accessing key informants from purposefully sampled stratified communities. The second author led sampling among student leaders and the first author among ex-prisoners and LGBTIQA+ individuals. While the first author interviewed all the respondents and took fieldnotes, the second author electronically recorded

and systematically serialised the interviews as either videos or sound files archived in our data bank. Both authors transcribed and translated interviews into English from local languages where necessary, conducted data interpretation and analysis, reviewed literature and co-authored research outputs which we routinely take turns to present orally at conferences, workshops or other fora. Departing from traditional academic norms of authoritarian, hierarchical, vertical relationships that valorise gerontocratic seniority instead of merit (Deridder et al. 2022; Stanley 1990), we practise a feminist ethos of egalitarian, horizontal collaboration emphasising shared responsibilities based on our respective strengths in fieldwork and information technology. While the first author initially received the research funds and was responsible for their timely disbursement to research participants for internet access and telephone calls before interviews, purchasing stationery and equipment and remuneration, these financial responsibilities shifted to the second author when the consortium transferred the second instalment of funds. Collaboration facilitated delegation, practical exchange and the transfer of research skills.

## Navigating Multiple Dilemmas of Normative Research Ethics

In the introductory vignette, Nalongo Nana Mw'Afrika finally agreed to participate in our research after extended processing of her informed consent. She initially hesitated to subject her widely publicised experiences of gross political violence to academic analysis. However, after many months, she decided on her own to participate in several interviews, often initiating subsequent sessions. She never signed any informed consent form. However, we always recorded verbal consent before beginning each interview. This repetitive negotiation of standardised research ethics echoed feminist rationale:

> ...the issue of ethical praxis in research remains a continuous and political project across the different strands of feminist theory. Ethics in feminist research is a political project that aims to address gaps and problems of representation in research (Kiguwa 2019, 232).

Although our interviews were always within the remit of our approved research instruments, participants often prioritised which experiences they shared. Similar to Nana, many participants who later remembered further details not shared in initial interviews asked for subsequent sessions. While some completed their first interview in one sitting, others prematurely aborted it because they could not bear the emotional toll of narrating painful memories, or due to unforeseen interruptions such as electricity cuts, internet disconnections, unplanned visitors or the need to attend to parents or children midway through the interview. We flexibly departed from rigid adherence to research protocols, including scheduled workloads, timed non-stop interviews, strictly following the step-by-step structure of listed questions and blindly determining each participant's point of saturation. This feminist practice echoes Mama's (2011, e12) reference to improvisation and adaptation for the local use of conceptual tools, feminist theory and new methods, "often in ways that are not fully conscious, and which often go unreported."

Considering that we were interviewing political, gender and sexual minorities, we adhered to foundational principles of research ethics, namely autonomy, non-maleficence, justice, beneficence, research merit and integrity. Our research participants constantly challenged the inflexible application of normative research ethics principles, e.g. refusing anonymity, rejecting pseudonyms, not yielding their autonomy to either male partners or older children to decide whether or not to participate in our research, insisting on monetary compensation for the internet, preferring verbal to written consent and demanding pragmatic utilitarian value from research participation. While contestable in application, these principles have universal claims in the literature. Alele and Malau-Aduli (2023) assert that "these principles are universal, which means they apply everywhere in the world, without national, cultural, legal or economic boundaries. Therefore, everyone involved in human research studies should understand and follow these principles." It is normative practice within traditional research to undergo rigorous preparation, endure bureaucratic submission processes, submit to assessment that sometimes entails interfacing with reviewers, revise and resubmit where necessary and eventually receive approval of protocols that stipulate strict observance of the principles of research ethics (Ibingira and Ochieng 2013).

The mandatory requirement of ethical review is taught in compulsory courses at all stages of university education, irrespective of discipline or geography. The academic classes are enforced through practical training before any research is conducted. These rituals engineer generational perpetuation of unquestioning subservience to normative research ethics review processes. Countries have centralised systems and hierarchical structures for effecting this technology of surveillance and approval of academic research. Disciplinary specialists, community leaders and representatives of minorities populate institutional ethics review boards whose annual proceedings and decisions are reported centrally to a national body that collates them in accessible databases. Adherence or non-compliance to standards is assessed from these data (Ochieng et al. 2013).

The Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) collaborates with the National Drug Authority[22] and the National HIV/AIDS Research and Ethics Committee[23] to manage the review of research ethics (UNCST 2014). Charles Rwabukwali (2007, 113) decried the dominance of biomedicine in UNCST's protocols and processes:

> ...UNCST has issued guidelines for good practices aimed at improving quality of research that is ethically grounded. Unfortunately, these guidelines are biased in favour of biomedical research, hence a need for guidelines dedicated to the social sciences and a framework for ethics to guide social science research in Uganda.

He identified four challenges, namely undue pressure/coercion, deception, privacy and confidentiality. Fontes (2004) and Mootz et al. (2019) highlight the scarcity of scholarship on ethics specific to conducting and disseminating research about violence.

Our research experience further uncovers other dimensions to the challenges of seeking ethical approval from UNCST. These include over-monetisation of the review process, which is a money-making venture for under-financed institutional review boards; unduly long back-and-forth submission processes; the politicisation of feminist research topics, such as sexual orientation and gender-based violence; and a lack of specialists to empathetically analyse feminist methodologies. Given our identities as dissident political exiles, accredited research ethics review boards would have hesitated to review our proposal. Perhaps submission would only have

succeeded through payment of hefty fees charged in foreign currency. Instead, *Feminist Africa*'s consortium reviewed and approved the science and ethics of our research. Regular consultations with a feminist professor helped us to troubleshoot and resolve ethical challenges encountered during data collection. We discussed the progress and challenges of fieldwork in monthly online workshops with consortium researchers.

An urgency to further develop African feminist ethical review processes persists. Given that traditional research still excludes people who fail selection criteria, it is important to expand the reach of feminist ethics that facilitate inclusion instead of exclusion. Women such as Nalongo Nana Mw'Afrika, who experience political violence, are still excluded from traditional research. Thus, they navigate, dismantle and recreate their own ethical requirements sensitive to their tears, tremors, trauma and truncated narratives. African feminism invites us to address the disjuncture between an inclusive ethical practice and exclusionary normative ethical review.

## Emergent Sample Using Purposive, Convenience and Snowball Sampling Techniques

Generally, the prized primary focus of feminist research is (biological) women's lived experiences (Kiguwa 2019, 223; Mama 2011). This rule has three exceptions. Firstly, not all research about women is necessarily feminist. Secondly, sustained criticisms have underscored an inherent essentialism that forbids interrogations and problematisation of the social construction of WOMAN as an ambivalent, fluid and changing gender category imbued with contextual meanings ( Moi 1999), WOMEN in their pluralities and diversities and WOMYN – an index for radical queer and non-binary feminists' refusal of reductionist reliance on essentialist marginalising handed down from patriarchy, misogyny, heterosexism and queerphobia (Kunz 2019; Khan 2017; Simamkele et al. 2017). Thirdly, historical developments within feminist movements comprising frictions, fractures, factions and unexpected fusions underscore competing, contradicting and intersecting forms of feminism. Indeed, there is no singular monolithic feminism, but rather a plethora of feminisms. Peace Kiguwa (2019, 223) critically asks and then provides an instructive response.

> …Is feminist research only ever concerned with women as subjects, and with exploring women's everyday experiences and social relations? Again, depending on what paradigmatic approach you adopt, the answers to this question would be very different.

Our overlapping self-identifications and affiliations with radical queer feminism and African feminism influenced our sampling frame. Our key informants were purposively sampled from women in Uganda who experienced political violence. Building upon intersectionality (Crenshaw 1993), we included varying generations, geographical locations, income brackets, professions, education levels, political party affiliation – including non-partisanship – and marital status. Furthermore, we opened the boundaries of our sampling frame to include queer people, transgender women and transgender men, non-binary and non-conforming gender identities and other forms of gender minorities. Developments in Uganda's socio-political scene, specifically escalating (but unresearched) state-instituted violence targeting LGBTIQA+ individuals and communities after the advent of the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023), informed a revision of the sampling frame.

From this broad sampling frame and autoethnography corroborated with public media content analysis, we developed a list of 20 potential key informants. Five individuals were reserved in case of refusals due to conflict of interest, unwillingness, unavailability, research fatigue and mistrust. These 20 informants were key nodal contacts to three categories of samples emergent in our study including (1) people who experienced political violence; (2) individuals, collectives, institutions, civil society organisations, state organs, regional or international bodies that offered support during or after political violence; and (3) individuals and associations that resisted political violence (*see figure 1 below*).

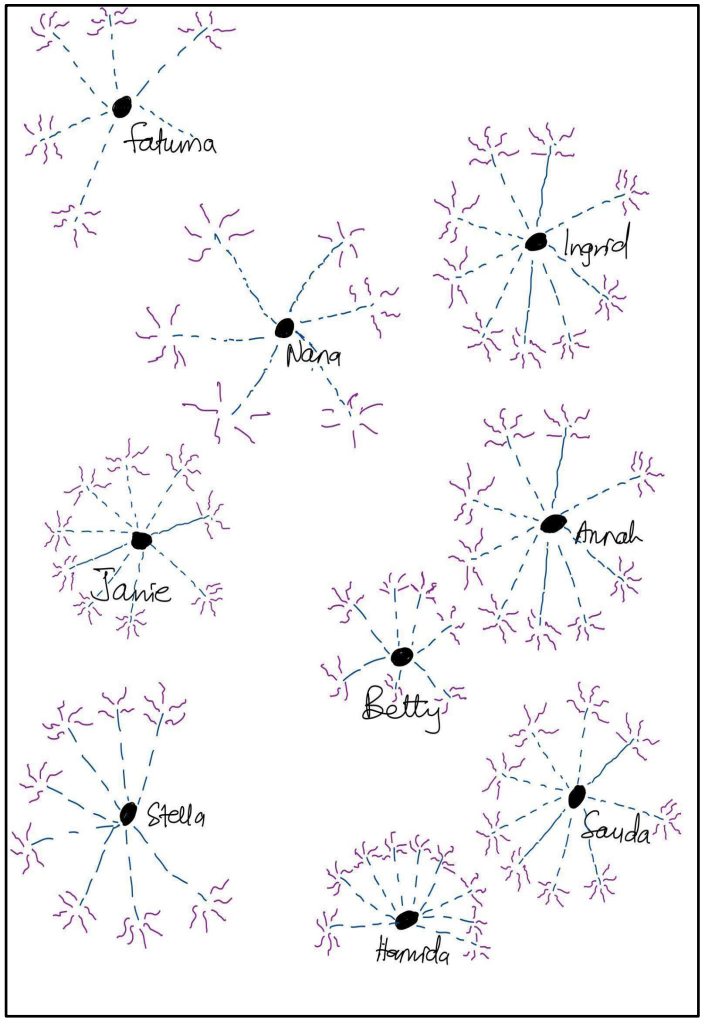


**Figure 1:** Key informants as nodes linking to support and resistance

There was an overlap between names we developed and names our key informants mentioned. This complementarity increased our confidence to implement the snowball sampling technique and confirmed the findings of our preliminary situational analysis of the research context. It also verified the credibility of our eventual sample, despite reported shortcomings of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Noy 2008).

Pursuant to our aim of generating grounded theory about gendered political violence, the emergent networks of support developed organically from our research processes, materials, interpretations and empirical findings. Most supporters acted privately, confidentially and away from public media. They were neither recognised nor named in public records.[24] Similarly, resistance work is largely under-researched, heavily tabooed, censored and frequently criminalised in the context of growing despotic militant authoritarianism (Tripp 2004). Thus, the key informants served as nodal links, granting us access to an underground nexus of highly invisibilised contextual resistance working to counteract gendered political violence in Uganda. Grounded theory uncovered this important sample of key informants from/with/about which we studied feminist resistance work.

## Feminist Praxis of Returning Power and Voice to Marginalised Women

The foregoing exploration of African feminist methodologies we appropriated to study gendered political violence with women and gender minorities uncovers the ambivalent combination of multiple advantages juxtaposed with challenges. Departing from male-dominated, positivistic research approaches, feminist methodologies facilitated our focus on often-neglected, hard-to-reach, silenced and largely invisibilised research participants, including subjugated opposition party members, dissidents, student protesters, ex-prisoners, ex-convicts, government critics, anti-establishment actors, gender minorities and LGBTIQA+ individuals (Naples 2007; Kiguwa 2019). While feminists have argued for the inclusion of otherwise excluded diversely gendered individuals – a position we strongly endorse – it is noteworthy that some potential research participants do not necessarily want to be found. Some prefer to and even insist on remaining undetected and concealing what they perceive to be shameful, painful, traumatising secrets in the service of self-preservation. African feminist ethics call for tactfully balancing a researcher's relentless search for knowledge with respect for the autonomy of research participants.

While a few research participants remained sedentary, the majority were highly mobile – shifting within and without Uganda as internally displaced persons, detainees, prisoners, fugitives, residents in protection houses, asylum seekers, refugees, illegal migrants and foreign students, among others. For example, Nalongo Nana Mw'Afrika was in Uganda when we first invited her to participate in the research; she then travelled to Kenya, Germany and back to Uganda during the period we interviewed her. She continues to travel widely. She was also twice in police detention and remanded in prison during the research. We were able to follow up, keep track, maintain or regain contact and resume research processes interrupted by the precarity of this mobility. Similar to the research participants, we ourselves were highly mobile in our residence, flexible in our research schedules and intermittent in our availability. Both researchers lived in exile during the research. While exile brought the disadvantage of physically removing us from our country of focus, it also availed the necessary illusion of relative safety from state surveillance and penalisation, thereby emboldening our research participants to trust our ability to freely write honestly for, about and with them. In a similar vein, the emboldening was ours to use as explained below by Nyanzi (2022, 5):

> Exile made the writing of this book possible… Writing and publishing this book when I was resident in Uganda would have most certainly invited more political persecution from dictator Museveni's punitive and repressive militant regime. Exile brought me relatively more freedom to write taboo topics.

Although there are long histories of exiled African women as slaves, colonised subjects, pro-independence freedom fighters, wanted political actors, dissident writers and critical musicians, there are relatively few creative and academic works produced for and by them. Contemporary African feminist studies have come of age, particularly with the rapid advancements of information technology, which enhance the urgency to appropriate innovative methodologies that trace, track, train and undertake research with highly mobile and excluded exiles. As two exiled Ugandan knowledge producers, our research necessarily recentres dispossession, disruptions and disadvantageous distancing as a vantage point for both researcher and researched. Rather than being daunted by the challenges of high mobility, constant shifts in residence, necessary concealment as fugitives, occasional disappearances and

inaccessibility of our research participants, we embraced these as methodological components of our research design. African feminist ethos informed our resilience, temerity, innovation and flexibility in our attempt to include these difficult research subjects because their stories matter to feminist justice away from courts of law.

Rather than merely conduct research *on* or *about* women and gender minorities, we deliberately chose to work *with* Ugandan women – as emphasised in this article's title. We were aware of potential power asymmetry between our research team and the participants. Drawing upon the feminist ethos of egalitarian collaboration, we continuously checked and countered expectations and projections of superiority cast upon us by our research participants who perceived and interpreted our residence abroad, educational attainment and track records of activism back home as indicators of relatively more power. However, feminist ethos demanded that we continually conscientised ourselves about the participatory politics of neutralising our power, thereby returning authority to the research participants. Thus, reflexivity was integral to our research processes. We debriefed immediately after each interview. This echoes Kiguwa's (2019, 232) assertion that:

> Feminist theory's project of recovering marginalised voices and exploring possibilities for social justice for women has broader implications for the place of reflexivity as a core ethical principle in research. The research encounter is invariably marked by unequal power between participants and the researcher.

When some research participants attempted to turn interviews into consultations for our advice about their challenges, we encouraged them to generate their own solutions. Many who experienced political violence reported finding our interviews therapeutic. For some, it was the first time they had publicly revisited and narrativised trauma that had been suppressed for years. Sometimes, these interviews were emotionally draining for our research team, necessitating detoxifying or consultations about how to effectively collect narratives of women's trauma without suffering mental illness including unmanageable grief, anxiety, depression or lethargy. What kept us going against all odds was the constant reminder of our desire to mete out feminist poetic justice through writing that named and shamed perpetrators while simultaneously celebrating survivors, their support networks and allies of resistance against political violence.

All our research processes, from designing research instruments to negotiating ethics, collecting data, processing, analysing, interpreting, theorising and writing, gave credence to women's often silenced, muted and erased voices (Boonzaier and Shefer 2006). Triangulating various mixed methods enhanced our rigour in collating and verifying research materials from alternative sources (Nyanzi et al. 2007). These data do not only provide thick descriptions that promote direct quotations from the very words of research participants, such as the introductory vignette, but also give voice to otherwise unjustly silenced individuals. The power of our feminist methodologies lies in their ability to centre women's voices despite experiencing gendered political violence in Uganda. The power of our feminist methodologies is the glue that facilitated our transgenerational collaboration which bridged several demographic differences, engendered our attention to a highly maligned topic and enabled us to expose the punitive military regime in the country from which we are presently exiled.

It is impossible to conclude this feminist methodological exploration, particularly because the research processes are still unfolding through our ongoing generation of emergent grounded theory about women's experiences of and resistance to political violence in Uganda. Akin to the subaltern speaking back or the hunted narrating their version of the hunt, our forthcoming grounded theory – conceived, birthed and nurtured through the intricate triangulation of feminist research methodologies outlined above – will confirm, complement, complicate, contradict or counter existent grand theories about violence against women in politics and political violence against women.

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## Notes

1. We adopt the names research participants chose. While some chose pseudonyms (preferring anonymity), others maintained their known identities.
2. Cultural title assigned to mothers of twins in Luganda. Both this researcher and the research participant are mothers of twins.
3. Feminist research is about the politics of gender. However, not all gender analyses are feminist research. Kiguwa (2019, 220) explains that "...some gendered research and analysis is not feminist in approach and orientation. This distinction is important as meanings of 'feminist' and 'gender' tend to be misleading in that they are often understood to refer to the same thing. Doing work and research on gender is not always feminist in orientation." Mama (2011, e8) distinguishes between "women's mobilizations" and "pursuing feminist agendas."
4. This methodological article is the first of four publications from our research. Subsequent publications focus on (1) ambivalences of feminist resistance against militarisation, (2) ethos of visibilising political violence against women dissidents and (3) building a grounded theory of support networks for resisting gendered political violence in Uganda.
5. "Organic" denotes a living, changing and developing concept whose nuances we are studying, debating and interrogating. We are open to emergent context-specific configurations of feminist research methodologies.
6. Despite its age, this reference remains relevant because there is a paucity of feminist research focused on describing and theorising research processes.
7. In this paper we distinguish between "grounded theory," "a grounded theory" and "grounded theories." Both the analytical framework and the research output(s) are called grounded theory. Furthermore, while the overall aim of our research was to theorise about gendered political violence from the data collected about

diverse experiences of our research participants, we realised that there were several sub-theories emanating from and contributing towards the main grounded theory. For example, state-instituted homophobic violence in Uganda is a sub-theory of political violence against gender and sexual minorities, just as dehumanisation through forced anal penetration of political activists during interrogation by police officers is a sub-theory of gendered political violence. These two sub-theories contribute towards the grounded theory we sought to generate using a grounded theory analytical approach.

8. *Feminist Africa* (2020) is "a continental gender studies journal produced by the community of feminist scholars in Africa. It provides a platform for intellectual and activist research, dialogue and strategy ... is guided by a profound commitment to transforming gender hierarchies in Africa, and seeks to redress injustice and inequality in its editorial policy, content and design." The journal is "committed to the strategic and political need to prioritise African women's intellectual work."

9. Mama (2011) conceptually discusses the feminist African intellectual community.

10. This research project was undertaken under the three-year-long *Feminist Africa* – Violence, Gender and Power: Feminist Struggles around Violence against Women Research Consortium, which started with a call for proposals issued in the journal.

11. The consortium comprised research teams whose proposals were successful. In addition to receiving a grant from *Feminist Africa*, all researchers met online regularly for methodological workshops and physically biannually for presentation of results and writing.

12. *Feminist Africa* granted US$6,000 to each selected research team, thereby enhancing recipients' capability to engage in research.

13. The research titled "From Assault to Rape at the Frontline: Resistance Experiences of Uganda's Women" commenced on 16 January 2023.

14. Detailed descriptive analyses of research findings on gendered political violence are contained in subsequent papers (Ashaba and Nyanzi, *forthcoming*; Nyanzi and Ashaba, *forthcoming*).

15. Some feminist schools of thought exclusively use qualitative research methods. They criticise quantitative methods drawn from positivistic and deductive research paradigms for being intrinsically male-centred and dominated by men as experts (Harding 1991, 1986, Boonzaier and Shefer 2006). Other feminists prefer case-specific decisions about combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Emphasis is placed on transcending the statistical measurement of fixed variables and advancing towards appropriating qualitative methods to unpack the complicated overlapping messiness of women's lives.

16. Research materials include (1) texts from newspapers, tabloids, magazines, letters, diaries, medical reports, police charge sheets, prison discharge notes and passports, (2) photographs published in print and electronically, and (3) video footage from television, documentaries and social media platforms.

17. While some resistance was mounted by individuals who experienced political violence, this was supplemented by other resistors, including individuals, collectives, organisations, professionals and politicians.

18. Runyakitara refers to four closely related Bantu languages spoken in Western Uganda, namely Runyankore, Rukiga, Rutoro and Runyoro.

19. The second author is a poet, essayist, short story writer, seasonal columnist in local and international newspapers. She is a government critic and activist, holds a Bachelor of Arts with Education from Makerere University and is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Social Justice and Community Action at the University of Edinburgh.

20. The first author is an academic researcher, dissident poet, social justice activist, social media commentator and government critic. She has a doctoral degree in Medical Anthropology with specialisation in sexual and reproductive health and rights, a Master of Science

degree in Medical Anthropology and a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication and Literature.

21. The second author jointly led the #FeesMustFall students' movement protesting unjust tuition fee increments at Makerere University in October 2019. She is a teacher, community organiser, social entrepreneur invested in eradicating menstrual poverty, and a human and women's rights activist. As a responder for political prisoners, she paid the first author multiple visits at Luzira Women's Prison. The first author held a nude protest for labour rights at Makerere University, won cases in the academic tribunal and civil court, organised socio-political protests for women, girls and pro-poor communities, advocated for LGBTIQA+ rights and campaigned for free speech.
22. For pharmacology.
23. For HIV/AIDS.
24. Future research will examine motivation to support victims of political violence.

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# Building Feminist Knowledges Through Everyday Conversations: Using Reflective Conversations as Research Methodology

Ruth Nekura

## Abstract

Reflective conversations are used by us feminists to question ourselves and the world from multiple perspectives. In this article, I reflect on my experience of using reflective conversations as a research methodology to explore how feminist knowledges are built through everyday informal conversations. I used this approach in a study that addressed violence against women by examining African feminist perspectives on state responsibility. I argue that these spaces of everyday informal conversations are a site of feminist knowledge building, enabled by a congruence of factors including a shared political analysis which makes it possible to link personal experiences to structural and systemic patterns of discrimination. While using this methodology, critical reflections emerge on the politics of the research process including questions of ethics, structure and form; what it means to be both researcher and participant; and the politics of time. In the end, the political value of headspace is clear – time and space to produce knowledge are central to determining who holds epistemic power.

**Keywords:** feminist knowledges, reflective conversations, informal knowledge building, African women, violence against women

## Introduction

Whenever I have informal conversations with fellow feminists, knowledges are built. What begin as random stories of experiences often spiral into power analyses of systems of inequality and deep resonance between us on

structural barriers to gender justice. It is common for us to end phone calls or social gatherings with statements such as "Ah, we should have recorded that" or "That's a paper right there." The discourse often results in epistemic shifts and sometimes action to subvert patriarchy and intersecting gendered inequalities.

This is not new. Feminist methodologies such as the use of stories and consciousness-raising have long been "processes by which individuals share personal experiences with others in an effort to derive collective significance or meaning from those experiences. Through consciousness-raising, women begin to view what otherwise might appear as isolated instances of insensitivity or chauvinism as symptoms of broader societal oppression" (Minow, Verchick and Levit 2016, 45). Such conversations enable feminists to not only name their grievances, but also "reinterpret reality in a critical fashion" (Chamallas 2012, 1). These interactions are not just spaces of insight and revelation, but also of knowledge building.

Knowledge is rooted in the relationships that produce it (Dupuis 2022). Feminist knowledges are built and sustained across an array of modes, spaces and epistemic communities across time (Okech 2020). These communities range from those generated by formal and structured academic spaces of teaching, instruction and research; networks; conferences and professional work settings; to others in much less institutionalised settings such as social movement spaces; conversations among ordinary people or work by individual activists or researchers in their own capacity. Sometimes mobility (Bennett 2009) across these modes, spaces and communities is so significant that, in my experience, it becomes difficult to distinguish between formal and informal contexts through which feminist knowledges are built. Yet, even when performing what may seem like a formal act of knowledge production such as I am doing – academic research and writing for publication under contract – it has always been clear that a greater part of the knowledge being produced for such purposes emerges from informal reflective conversations. By informal, I mean relaxed, unstructured, casual and friendly settings where off-the-record conversations happen in an environment of familiarity and trust.

Feminist scholars have for a long time challenged ways of knowing that keep the "intellectual and personal apart in neat separate categories" (Lundgren and Prah 2009, 174). Feminists have resisted the idea that for knowledge to be accepted as scientific, it must be "objective," meaning that it is value-free, disembodied and produced by researchers who are separated from their beliefs, values and contexts (Adomako Ampofo and Arnfred 2009; Mejiuni 2013; Harding 2013; Okech 2020; Yadav 2018). "We are embodied and embedded natures and these facts about us matter when making claims to know something" (Assiter 2003, 330). Feminist scholars have also disrupted the idea that personal, emotional and embodied knowledge is incapable of being "objective" or "scientific" (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). Haraway proposes a definition of objectivity that is different from positivist conceptions of objectivity. She says feminist objectivity means "situated knowledges" with elements including positionality, partiality and accountability (Haraway 1988, 581; Bhavnani 1993).

In this article, I reflect on my experience of using "reflective conversations" as a research methodology that specifically explores how feminist knowledges are built through informal conversations in the course of everyday life. These are reflective conversations with feminists with whom I am in longstanding relationships – good friends, mentors and close colleagues. I rely on Marina Cadaval Narezo's work and concept of "reflective conversations" because it expresses for me a way of producing knowledge that centres informality, care, affection and respect (2022).

I used this methodology in a research study that sought to address violence against women (VAW) by exploring feminist perspectives on state responsibility. Although there are well-established frameworks on the meaning, scope and content of state responsibility, which detail state obligations in prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment of perpetrators and provision of adequate remedies for survivors of violence – commonly referred to as the "five Ps" (Smythe 2008; Benninger-Budel 2008; Manjoo 2013; Qureshi 2013; Aziz and Moussa 2014; García-Del Moral and Dersnah 2015; Nekura 2023) – this study explored other pathways of feminist thinking through what should constitute effective state responsibility, from and in practice. The focus of this study is on how feminists in their activism, research and experiences navigate both the limits of the law and its potential as a tool

for social justice in pursuit of a world where women can live free from all forms of violence. This article focuses only on reflections from the methodology. Findings of the broader study on feminist perspectives on state accountability for VAW will be published separately.

The participants I spoke with in this study were African feminist activists located in different spaces – academics, independent researchers, individual activists working at various levels of influence, staff working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs). While some of them worked in expressly feminist spaces, others conducted their "feminisms" within more general institutional and other contexts. The participants were from diverse disciplines and sectors including law, philanthropy, grassroots organising, sociology, humanitarian work, development, health programming and entrepreneurship. They included individuals from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa.

The cross-cutting factor was that the participants were not just in my networks; they were people with whom I had worked closely on VAW work for a long time, whether in movement/activist spaces or in the academy. I would describe most of them as very good friends or close colleagues with whom I have relationships of care, respect and affection. With all of them – some more frequently than others – I have had many informal conversations that have generated knowledge and shaped our work, from authoring academic papers to preparing legal arguments in court submissions, developing curricula, writing position papers and developing NGO strategic plans.

In this article, I argue that these informal and sometimes random (being unwittingly generative in unforeseen ways) conversations among feminists are sites of knowledge building. I also reflect on the politics of the research process that emerged, including of structure, form and ethical access; my positionality; my role as a researcher/participant and the co-creation that happens through reflective conversations; insights from re-thinking debriefing processes for VAW research; and the politics of time.

## Reflective Conversations as a Feminist Methodology

Narezo defines reflective conversations as "discussions, encounters that depart from common and mutual understandings – (our diverse feminisms) – through which we find and examine ourselves in multiple times and spaces." Such conversations go "beyond obtaining information, systematizing it and presenting it as a final and individual product" (2022, 140). It is a methodological process that entails the constant exercise of reflection – confrontational and questioning – on the implications of producing knowledge. It requires "paying attention to the forms, to the substance, the background, the contexts, the personal and collective interests, to temporalities – the ephemerality of an encounter and the permanency of a memory; to the vulnerability of shared emotions" (Narezo 2022, 140).

I found that using this approach facilitated holistic reflections on personal and structural violence. Such violence is produced by systems of domination and sustained through societal institutions, cultures and systems designed to perpetuate discrimination on the basis of intersecting factors such as sex, gender, race and economic status, to deny women and other marginalised communities physical and emotional well-being (Anglin 1998; Crenshaw 1994). Reflective conversations allowed room for emotions in discussions of wins and disappointments in the collective commitment to state accountability for VAW. Reflective conversations happen because there is also an investment in the political intention to see a world where gender justice is a reality.

For some researchers, these characteristics may well exist in conventional interviews or focus group discussions, with little difference from reflective conversations, depending on their design. In this research, I find that Narezo's conceptualisation of reflective conversations provides more depth and clarity for expressing both decolonial and feminist epistemologies that centre embodiment, relationality and emotion in knowledge production.

Narezo's "reflective conversations" concept is not self-standing but anchored in a long tradition of feminist epistemologies. The intentional centring of care, reflexivity, informality, relationships and rejection of western disembodied conventional methodologies is not new. It is based on the intention to generate situated knowledges (Harcourt et al 2022; Bhavnani

1993; Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) and draws on work that Black American, African, Indigenous and decolonial feminists have proposed (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000; Mama 2011; Smith 2012). Informal research methodologies have also been used widely in various qualitative approaches, for example, in participant observations and in feminist reclamations of ethnography (Makana 2018).

Drawing on autoethnography, Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) document their own use of informal conversations in their friendship to tell stories and share personal experiences, which they connect to broader social and political processes in academic research. For them, informal "everyday talk" is used as a medium for reflecting on their positionality, situatedness and accountability in their research journeys – what they call "kitchen table reflexivity." Relying on the works of Black feminist scholars such as Collins (2009) and hooks (1989, 2000, 2009), Kohl and McCutcheon demonstrate that feminist scholarship has always been about bringing everyday experiences into the realm of academic research.

Reflective conversations also have a place within the oral traditions of African knowledge systems. Much has been written about how customs, traditions, beliefs and opinions were passed on orally until the advent of colonisation when literacy was given precedence and millennia of complex oral Indigenous knowledge systems were devalued (Mbunwe-Samba 1994; Zegeye and Vambe 2006; Msuya 2007). These oral, conversational practices were not only about customs and traditions but also technical knowledge building and transfer through telling stories, sharing experience and engaging memory knowledge (Osei-Tutu 2022; Abdi 2007; Abah and Denuga 2015; Sone 2018; Falade 2013). Ikuenobe writes about how these knowing systems are justified through "principles of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, and epistemic communalism" (2018).

African feminist scholars have argued that these oral forms of knowledge can make visible a sense of knowing that is often muted by Euro-western mythologies and dominant male thought (Jagire 2013; Chilisa 2010; Wane 2011, 2014; Manyozo 2018; Nkealah 2016). As a result, it is by exploring women's lived experiences and relational worlds that ideologies of oppression against them can be exposed.

## Reflective Conversations as a Site of Feminist Knowledge Building

It is the emphasis on the reflective in "reflective conversations" methodology that I believe facilitates feminist knowledge building in ways that may not be possible with other kinds of conversations, dialogues or discussions. When considering the difference between conversations that build knowledge and others that may not, what comes to mind is the distinction between "knowledge" and "opinion" or "information," a distinction that the academy and scientific communities are often quick to use to discount knowledge systems that are unconventional or unfamiliar to Eurocentric ways of knowing (Kilomba 2008).

My purpose is not to stratify what forms of conversations, methods or processes qualify as reflective "knowing." The emphasis is on an analysis of the conditions in this research that enabled and exhibited feminist knowledge building. The analysis is partial and based on the specific context and points of inquiry. Being limited to context, they are not generalisable. I noted five factors that worked in congruence to facilitate and demonstrate feminist knowledge building through informal reflective conversations.

### *A shared political analysis that deliberately links individual experiences to structural and systemic inequalities*

Reflective conversations are knowledge-building interactions where there is a shared political analysis. I do not claim that knowledge cannot be produced through disagreement and debate. However, what this research uncovered was that mutual understanding and a shared politics enabled feminist knowledge building. Deep insights were generated precisely *because* there were agreed and aligned points of departure. This enables feminists to ideate, conceptualise and develop knowledge without the burden of having to defend or justify their politics before the thinking process moves forward. A shared political analysis also enabled our conversations to unearth challenges that frustrate the pursuit of state accountability for VAW.

For example, in several conversations, it was mutually agreed that "woman" is not synonymous with "feminist" and that women's rights organisations, which are often perceived by states and CSOs in many

countries as feminist, are not feminist in their approach. They are depoliticised and exclusionary. They operate in ways that are geared towards maintaining respectability within oppressive power structures and close affiliations with state actors. This depoliticisation compromises their ability to challenge intersecting gendered power inequalities or play the role of CSOs that should hold states accountable. They are not interested in unsettling the status quo of power inequalities.

With that point of departure being settled, the reflective conversations on what would be considered effective state responsibility to address VAW moved to deeper insights. Doing so entailed, for example, interrogating the cost of co-option in processes of identifying solutions to VAW. In other words, we explored what happens when women's rights organisations can be co-opted by state institutions to advance their propaganda. We considered how such compromises sacrifice freedom, leading to interventions that do not target the root causes of VAW, and to outcomes with very little transformative potential. We discussed how a depoliticised civil society not only results in limited thresholds in terms of the meaning and scope of state accountability for VAW, but also hampers the ability of activists or organisations to hold states accountable for VAW. Therefore, having mutual points of departure – such as our feminisms – facilitated knowledge building.[1]

Knowledge was built through reflective conversations that linked the individual to the structural. Connecting the personal and the political facilitated knowledge building by revealing how unique personal lived experiences sometimes reveal systemic patterns of violence. For example, one conversation began with a participant's disclosure of her own experience of sexual harassment. We discussed the participant's efforts to seek justice through the courts and the challenges she faced therein. The case eventually ended after a tedious legal process that took years, and that decentred her and centred the state and the perpetrator, who was acquitted. The only possible remedy at the end of the process, had it gone in her favour, was imprisonment or a fine to be paid to the state. As we talked through the gaps and limits of the criminal justice system, the conversation turned to whether there is legal recognition of a victim's voice in the criminal justice process, what to do about the limited conceptions of punishment and remedies, and what would constitute transformative remedies for VAW.[2]

In addition, reflective conversations facilitate linkages between individual and structural factors as a way of building knowledge. For instance, one participant remarked:

> My knowledge and collective knowledge have been built informally, and it's from sitting, understanding how other people think. It is like a flashlight, a torch, to see things in your life that were hidden to you, you know? "Oh, wait, that happens to me too, and to others; why is that? I've never questioned that." And then, now you begin to question it, and I think that's how knowledge is built.[3]

## *Knowledge is built through reflections that happen in safe thinking spaces that are intentionally curated*

Feminist knowledge building happens through reflective conversations curated intentionally in safe thinking spaces, with trust and affective solidarity. These spaces may be structured or emerge spontaneously based on how feminists interact with everyday life and work as colleagues or friends. The conversations happen offline and online. Some begin professionally and friendships grow from them. Sometimes, knowledge building is part of feminist meetings curated as informal reflective conversations. On other occasions, they happen in the isolated corners of formal meeting spaces, such as conference venues or classrooms. They also happen at parties, in hotel rooms and during social gatherings. This demonstrates how hostile environments impel feminists to carve out spaces for their reflective conversations.[4] What was consistent was that the conversations were intentionally curated, meaning that people made time for them and wished to speak with and listen to others in a safe space.

In these spaces of community and affective solidarity (Vachhani and Pullen 2019), feminist thinking happens in ways that reassure feminists that they are not crazy. One participant explained:

> You want to think in a safe space because we know we are transgressive. We hold views that other people don't hold. So, if I want to build knowledge, if I want to grow or discuss ideas that are affirming, that help us grow, I know where to go, because I know from there something positive is going to happen.[5]

Another participant described how such safe thinking spaces can be a haven from the world's oppressive systems:

> …because we are faced with the realities of homophobia, or white supremacy, or cisheteropatriarchy every day. So, I think that these conversations are really important. I don't feel alone. I feel like I'm not crazy. How I see the world is not crazy. These things actually happen, and they deserve to be addressed; they deserve to be spoken about.[6]

Across the board, there were similar expressions of the reality that reflective conversations happened because of the generosity, care and leadership of feminists, and especially feminist elders. For example, one person observed:

> Some people who are more senior than us at the time, they made a concerted effort to create a space for feminists to just come and have lunch and hang out. A lot of feminist knowledge was generated in those spaces.[7]

Several participants named and elevated their African feminist elders (across generations), who intentionally curated spaces for informal reflective conversations that led to knowledge building with the people involved in this research. Most of these elders were mentioned repeatedly by different people. They included Awino Okech, Catherine Nyambura, Hope Chigudu, Jacinta Muteshi, Lebohang Liepollo Pheko, Rashida Manjoo, Saida Ali, Sibongile Ndashe and Sylvia Tamale.

## *Reflective conversations often result in action*

Feminist knowledge building was often demonstrated by the action that resulted from the reflective conversations. In one instance, a participant described a reflective conversation that began as a discussion between two feminists walking out of a theatre, about a case of VAW perpetrated by a local celebrity, which had been reported in the news. On their way home, they encountered a poster advertising a concert of another international celebrity who had been accused of multiple instances of VAW. Their conversation spiralled into an analysis of the impunity with which famous people perpetrate gender-based violence. The two feminists then sat in a restaurant and developed a strategy to address this impunity. The strategy involved mobilising fellow feminists and launching a campaign to stop the international celebrity from entering the country. As a result, he was banned and the concert was cancelled. She recalled:

> …we started developing like the strategy on the serviette in a restaurant after watching a film, you know. We put the strategy on Facebook, called people: one was in the media, the other one was a celebrated poet, so she could be the spokesperson for the campaign, the other people were IT techies. I was the writer of the statements. We contacted the government, contacted the police and found out [about] all the other cases against him. We had like a regional mobilisation. Within three days, Koffi Olomide's concerts had been cancelled and visa withdrawn. So, it's conversations, it's the stories.[8]

There were several other examples of actions that resulted from reflective conversations. They ranged from epistemic shifts to "personal advocacy" that led to breaking a cycle of domestic violence as illustrated below:

> The reality sometimes of conversations such as this is, I have had such conversations with a sister, and they come to the realisation that, you know what, I actually have to leave. Now he will gouge my eyes out the way we are seeing. So, the conversations resulted in a level of personal advocacy that happens – not because the state did anything to create awareness.[9]

## *Reflective conversations make visible ways of knowing that cannot be fully expressed in written or literary form*

Several participants saw these informal reflective conversations as sites of building the kinds of knowing that cannot be found or fully expressed through any written form. For example, in a reflective conversation about how trauma from gendered (personal and structural) violence can cause the fragmentation of social movements – and how that trauma plays out in ways that cannot often be observed or measured – one participant affirmed:

> I will never read this somewhere, Ruth. I will never because when certain things are written on violence, or that are about our movements, they are couched in certain ways. It is through feminist conversations that you get it raw, as it is. I have gotten it raw, as it is, through such conversations with Hope. Not that I didn't know these from reading, but she brought it home to me in a way I will never read in any book. It will not have the emotions in it.[10]

We then went on to discuss how knowing through the body, through feelings and emotions, when having a conversation with someone in-person, is sometimes hard to put into words.

Reflective conversations are also knowledge building because they provide a medium for analysing phenomena as they happen. For example, one feminist described a conversation that happened at a local seafood market. As the interlocutors selected their fish and ate, they noticed how small and scanty the market had become since the last time they were there, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The conversation grew into the gendered impact of informal trade and the asymmetrical economic subsidies that privilege big businesses. She explained that this evolution of the conversation instantiated a methodology through which live knowledge is built as phenomena occur. It highlights the idea that although written form is important, it does not circumscribe knowledge. She continued:

> All these are live conversations, shaped by the reality of what we've gone to the market to do. We are doing this together. We start having a very deep feminist conversation about how economies are defined, about how people are still struggling – because look at the market. It used to be full. Where are the people? You understand? So, those conversations you're not going to read about, because the knowledge is happening in real time. It's not about waiting to read about it after someone writes about it long after the market is closed, like a year later. No, we're talking now.[11]

In this example, the weaving of factors such as shared memory from the last time these two feminists were at that market together, their friendly relationship, a shared political perspective, the ability to link individual experiences/micro and structural macroeconomics, as well as the local and global geopolitical analysis, converged in ways that produced this feminist knowledge about gendered structural and economic violence in the context of a fish market in Mozambique on a Friday evening.

## Reflections On the Politics of Research Processes

### *The dissonance of structure, form and ethics*

My decision to use informal reflective conversations as research methodology was both exciting and uncomfortable. As I reflected on the discomfort, I realised that much of it comes from my perceptions about what proper academic research should be, which for me is typically formal, distanced and

structured in ways that make the knowledge produced easily acceptable as valid by scientific communities. It is imbued with strict justifications for any anomalies that fall outside conventional research methods. Therefore, embarking on a research process that centred informality, affection, connection and relational knowledge building was at odds with what I thought I knew about research processes and knowledge production. Some aspects of the dissonance were familiar, that is, they emanated from the contradictions I live with, being a feminist and a lawyer. But it went beyond that.

As I reflected, two life paths or trajectories emerged as possible explanations for the dissonance. The first is my legal and academic training, which was based largely on positivist traditions. For instance, during my PhD training, even though I was fortunate to work with feminist academics, it was always clear that we were in the minority within the law faculty. The PhD journey itself (being an exam with a strict passing formula) was still largely a process of developing knowledge within very constricted paradigms for the purposes of demonstrating to a coterie of academics in ivory towers that one has the capacity for original theoretical contribution. The dominant perspective is that these restricted paradigms are the only way to demonstrate such capacity for knowledge production. Accordingly, there was an inclination to align with conventional, positivist and Eurocentric epistemologies to "pass the test."

The second path is several years of working with NGOs in precarious donor relations and funding cycles where knowledge generated from project activities is often required to fit neatly within boxes of rigidly defined results frameworks. This leads to the loss of rich insights and ideas from activist work that could fuel feminist imaginations of a world where women can live free from violence. The NGO knowledge generation process becomes reduced to one of counting observable, measurable project outcomes, such as numbers of people trained or cases supported through the criminal justice system.

In addition, most relationships between donors and NGOs are characterised by distrust and suspicion about how funding is used. Therefore, I come from a tradition where the documentation of work by activists is used mainly to prove that funds were used properly. Field reports are reduced to scanty folios that focus less on reflections and more on tick-box gathering of

evidence to disprove misappropriation – receipts, signing sheets, consent forms and field photographs. There is, of course, nothing wrong with diligence and accountability, which should in fact be encouraged. However, these methods leave little room for generative knowledge building from activists' reflections on our everyday resistance to gender inequalities.

What emerges from historicising my situatedness in these two life paths (academia and NGO culture) is how they have shaped my ideas about legitimate knowledge production processes, including structure, form, content, communication with participants, what I wear, my tone of voice, acceptable meeting settings, and how interviews are structured. They have shaped my approach to knowing.

As I grappled with this dissonance, I became aware of the times when I was performing "Dr Ruth", the legal researcher, and the times when I was being myself within the relationships in which knowledge was being produced. I was grateful for the work of feminist scholars who documented their own reflections on their relational research processes in their own contexts (Okech 2013; Mupotsa 2011).

The process of obtaining consent for this research, including providing information to facilitate participants' decisions, went beyond the typical preparation of information sheets and consent forms with a signature section (which would have fulfilled the requirements of the ethics review committee). I used an invitation form that was less about ensuring that information concerning the study was included, and more about how I came to this research, why I want to do it, the central points of inquiry, the approach, what I thought was the participant's role and why I was inviting them. For several participants, this approach forestalled anxieties about whether they had to prepare anything technical before we spoke. I noticed that this structure also made it easy for many of them to engage with the information and begin reflections even before we met.

Instead of the typical consent form, I developed a document called Ethics of Care. It included the issues in consent form checklists such as confidentiality, informed voluntary consent, anonymity and payment clauses, but it went further to address the ethical concerns I had thought about, such as the power dynamics in informal relational research and the need for a

better debriefing approach for violence research. The consent form did not have signatures; instead, the focus was on explaining the risks of research and ethical considerations and developing a shared understanding of how continued informed consent would happen. I found signatures inappropriate and unethical in this context, with the potential to introduce a dynamic that is inimical to the safe spaces where the reflective conversations would take place.

In taking the decision to exclude signatures, I reflected on questions such as: what are the reasons for requesting signatures before participation in research? What do signatures invoke in such contexts? What do participants think they are "giving up" or "giving over" to the researcher by signing? Who is being protected by such signatures? Protected from what, how and why? I found that there are problems with viewing signed written forms as the ultimate evidence of consent. Wynn and Israel challenge the insistence on signed consent forms and argue that "written consent may not protect participants, may mask unethical research, and may often be inappropriate for legal, cultural, political or historical reasons." They show that although ethics review bodies construct the practice of written signed consent forms as universal, it is in fact specific to dominant western cultures and ideologies about authenticity, power and form. These bureaucracies persist despite "the ample evidence that signed consent neither documents nor materializes ethical research relationships" (2018, 1).

I thought about the ethics of what it means for me to conduct research in these informal reflection spaces where often sensitive, off-the-record, personal and confidential information is shared on the basis of trust. Despite the relationships of trust and care between the other participants and me, I still hold the power to interpret the knowledge produced and determine how it is analysed and displayed, what is included and excluded in articles such as this, and how the stories are told. I navigated this power through honest conversations with participants about my responsibilities as the researcher. I highlighted the non-innocence of research in an open discussion with participants, including how it can be used as a tool for domination (Smith 2012). I explained my intentions to move away from extractive research which is "on and about" people rather than "with and for" them (Harcourt 2022). This prompted more discussions concerning my responsibility and accountability.

It included questions about how I would ensure confidentiality, present information accurately and truthfully, remain transparent by sharing various drafts with the participants for their review, and seek clarification as needed along the entire research process.

## *On being a researcher/participant and the value of knowledge co-creation*

I assumed the position of "researcher/participant" to bridge the gap between "researcher" and "researched" and dismantle the hierarchy of "subject" and "object" in which the former is the supposed "knower." Being both researcher and participant also facilitated the co-creation of knowledge through reflective conversations. Through mutual dialogue, I was actively involved in the conversations, sharing my own experiences as the participants recounted theirs, and questions flowed both ways, which made participants comfortable and forthcoming. Danai Mupotsa used a similar approach in research on gender and sexuality in Zimbabwe that analysed the experiences of young women (2011, 101).

The safe spaces allowed for unique and shared experiences to be woven into the process of knowledge production. The characteristics of reflective conversations, the space of trust, respect and care in which they took place, and where nobody was judged, allowed for disclosures and imagining to happen. The combination of experience and discourse (Mupotsa 2011) allowed for a process through which "explicit and implicit meanings were shared" (Mama 1995, 98). The knowledge co-creation was expressed variously, sometimes as drawings or illustrations used to explain concepts or relationships between ideas.

Even though I had some commonalities with the participants, not least because we were all African women feminist activists, our experiences and realities were diverse. There were power dynamics at play that I was conscious of and had to navigate through the research processes. Some of the participants were my former bosses, while I was a former boss to others. There were socio-economic differences. I thought about what it meant to invite friends or close colleagues to be part of my research: did they believe they had the right to say no?

Were there concerns about the implications for our relationship, regarding their being "supportive" for my project? While invitations for research participation from strangers can easily be ignored without much consequence, the case is different with requests from a close friend or colleague. I navigated most of this terrain through flexibility (in expectations, time and process), and by listening, creating many opportunities for honest questioning or feedback and being responsive. The research process was driven by a recognition that power moves in informality.

## *Rethinking the debriefing process to meaningfully address the risks of trauma in VAW research*

The risks associated with conducting research on gender-based VAW are well documented, including the possibility of respondents and researchers being traumatised by accounts of violent experiences (World Health Organization 2005; Mulla and Hlavka 2011). Even in studies that do not ask direct questions about people's experiences of violence, traumatic events may be recounted.

Research in general and especially on violence can be extractive. It often engages people on the margins of society about experiences that are difficult, and this can trigger or activate certain traumatic experiences and emotions. People with such experiences are often from communities that do not have access to resources and spaces of healing (Chirape 2021). In this research, even though I did not ask about participants' experiences of violence, their stories often led us to discussions of personal and structural violence.

Traditional debriefing processes commonly consist of providing participants with resources such as contact lists of therapists, hotlines, rape crisis centres, domestic violence shelters and reading material on processing trauma. This was the approach recommended by the ethics review body that evaluated my research, along with a mandatory debriefing email/letter template. I found this approach inadequate for a few reasons. First, the participants in this study, being activists and professionals working on VAW, may know or have personal or professional connections with providers of psychosocial support services likely to be on contact lists provided as part of

the traditional debriefing process. This familiarity may cause participants discomfort about consulting such service providers.

Second, most of the psychosocial services listed that are free are in high demand and under-resourced, which makes it difficult to confirm their availability, quality, consistency and ability to support in debriefing cases of trauma that differ from the typical rape or domestic violence crises that they handle. I was also not sure whether these spaces are queer-friendly. For these reasons, research participants do not often respond to or engage with such resources provided on contact lists.

In re-thinking debriefing, I decided to partner with a feminist psychologist, Skye Chirape, whose work involves healing and responding to the violence that can result from research processes. Together, we established a debriefing plan, and she held space for participants to deal with trauma arising from the research, as well as any other emotions that were activated in the process. The debriefing consisted of two sessions paid for from the research funds provided by *Feminist Africa*. Participants could have the two debriefing sessions with their preferred therapist or healer and be reimbursed for the expense.

The debriefing was structured in a way that recognised the need to provide feminist activists with a healing space for their work and life generally. This means that the debriefing process was about how the research could add value to the participants, recognising the general difficulties and impact of existing in contexts where they are constantly challenging systems of oppression. The debriefing invitation did not assume that participants were traumatised. They were encouraged to take up the offer even if the research did not activate any negative feelings, or if it evoked positive feelings such as joy, pleasure, solidarity and love. This debriefing approach was about recognising that reflective conversations as knowledge-building processes are part of all other activist work.

Of the 12 participants, 10 took up the debriefing offer: eight went with the plan established with Chirape while two chose to have sessions with their own therapists; the remaining two opted out. Most of the participants wrote back about their positive experiences with the debriefing process. They described the value of this space as being the rare opportunity for someone to

hold space for them to just reflect and debrief about their work, especially the emotional and psychological labour that comes with doing social justice work. They were grateful to be part of a research process that not only took but also gave.

## *The politics and privilege of time*

The reflective conversations methodology revealed the centrality of time in knowledge production. In *Gender and the Politics of Time*, Valerie Bryson argues that "Time is both a primary good and a political resource … and the distribution of time is both unjust and a source of political inequality" (2007, 1). In this research, the inequalities that were made visible were that the distribution of time determines who can produce knowledge and in what way.

Those who have the privilege of time become "knowers" because research and writing take time. Several participants expressed the desire for more time for such reflective conversations, and to analyse and write the knowledges issuing forth from these interactions and their own work. It was difficult for the African women I spoke with, who have the capacity to develop feminist knowledges, to do so due to several challenges. Few people, including academics, have paid research time. Many participants also mentioned the burden of care work, which they often bear alone at home. This meant that the "before or after work" time they often set aside for research and reflection is hard to realise because of the responsibilities of care work. In addition, many feminist activists have busy work schedules that leave very limited time and capacity for reflecting. Sentiments such as "the reality is that activists do, academics write" or "Black people implement, White people theorise" or "African women do the work, northern scholars publish it" recurred in the research.[12]

Time also affects how research is conducted. Applying feminist methodologies may require the kind of flexibility that takes a long time to attain. It may also result in "inconveniences" that take time to resolve. In addition, researching in politically volatile contexts marked by insecurity and political instability requires taking breaks during the process. In my case, just before I embarked on this study, I was dealing with exhaustion and burnout from doing feminist lawyering work within such unstable contexts. I decided

to resign from my job to rest and recover. I also resigned because I wanted to have more time for research and writing, and it had become clear that I could not do so while holding down a full-time job as legal director.

I was able to take these decisions because I am privileged to have a dual-income family, had saved up enough money to live on for a while, and have a supportive husband. The typical demands of life do not allow for dedicated time and space to write. I wrote most of this article during a time when my professor friend allowed me to use her beach house in Portugal for a solo resting and writing retreat at no cost. I was quite literally "gifted" time and space. I know that without this combination of privileges, this article would not have been possible.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have reflected on the process of using reflective conversations as a feminist methodology in a study of feminist perspectives on state responsibility for dealing with VAW. I have argued that spaces for everyday informal conversations are a site of feminist knowledge building and discussed the factors that enable this process. In using this methodology, I grappled with the dissonance between this process and the nature of "proper" academic research, partly due to the positivist legal and academic training I received as well as my NGO background. During this research, I often had to confront what it means to be situated in different disciplines and sectors, interrogate what I think I know, and challenge many of my assumptions about research processes.

The greatest lesson from this study is my recognition of the political value of headspace. Time and space for producing knowledge are central to determining who holds (epistemic) power. Through reflective conversations, feminists build knowledges that are vital and actionable by weaving in experience and discourse. This knowledge building goes beyond responding to or "talking back" to hegemonic or conventional western or male-centered theories and trying to locate African women's realities within them. It is about beginning ideation from the diverse realities of African women by African women. As one of the participants noted:

> As African feminists, we can theorise for ourselves. We can determine and speak to how we see things – how we see things changing or being impacted, why things exist, and why they exist in a certain way. We can give an explanation that makes sense, not just to ourselves, but to the world.[13]

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the African feminists who co-created this knowledge with me, for their time, generosity and enthusiasm.

## Notes

1. Reflective conversations with P1 (26 August 2023), P7 (13 September 2023), P10 (12 October 2023).
2. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
3. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
4. Reflective conversations with P4 (30 August 2023), P5 (23 September 2023), P8 (23 August 2023), P1 (26 August 2023).
5. Reflective conversation with P12 (22 September 2023).
6. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
7. Reflective conversation with P3 (25 August 2023).
8. Reflective conversation with P12 (22 September 2023).
9. Reflective conversation with P1 (26 August 2023).
10. Reflective conversation with P11 (5 October 2023).
11. Reflective conversation with P1 (26 August 2023).
12. Reflective conversations with P1 (26 August 2023), P12 (22 September 2023), P5 (23 September 2023), P6 (15 August 2023), P8 (23 August 2023).
13. Reflective conversation with P2 (28 August 2023).

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# Transition Like an Egyptian: Investigating Transgender Experiences with Violence in Egypt

**Nora Noralla**

## Abstract

Transgender individuals in Egypt belong to marginalised communities that operate within a sensitive security context. This context is shaped by a complex interplay of legal, social, religious, and medical structures that perpetuate anti-transgender violence, threatening their existence in both public and private spheres. Despite the intricacies of their experiences within these violent frameworks, transgender issues remain largely invisible in academic literature, with only two studies employing participatory empirical methods to shed light on transgender experiences in Egypt. The experiences of transgender individuals in the country are notably complex and resist singular characterisation; even the term "transgender" lacks a generally accepted definition, with experiences varying significantly based on factors such as socio-economic class and family acceptance. Nonetheless, there are commonalities among these diverse experiences which contribute to a broader understanding of transgender issues in Egypt. This study adopts qualitative interdisciplinary approaches to address existing limitations by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 transgender Egyptians. This methodology contextualises their experiences and analyses their interactions with the anti-transgender violent structures that shape their lives within the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context, specifically in Egypt.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, Gender Minorities, Participatory Research, Egypt, Intersectionality

## Introduction

In the 1980s, Egyptian society, state institutions, and medical and religious establishments were introduced to the modern medical concept of "transsexualism" through the case of Sally Abdullah. Sally was a transgender woman and a medical student at the Islamic Al-Azhar University whose transition journey garnered significant debate among various stakeholders in Egypt. Often referred to as the "first transsexual woman in Egypt," Sally's case is likely not the first instance of a transgender individual in the country; however, it is the first to be extensively documented in the modern age of mass media (Skovguard-Peterson 1995). Before Sally's case, Egyptian society engaged with various non-conforming social identities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, predominantly within sex work spaces that were legalised until 1949. These identities included the *Khawal,* individuals assigned male at birth who assumed traditional female roles as dancers, and the *Hasangya* and *Aranb,* terms often used to describe individuals assigned male at birth who adopted effeminate social roles and engaged in sex work with other men (Hatata 2001; Nieuwkerk 2008).

Social identities categorised as *Khawal, Hasangya,* and *Aranb* were largely confined to sex work, which is perceived as immoral. They existed prior to the emergence of modern gender-affirming healthcare,[1] which assists individuals in both social and medical transitioning, and before the age of mass media. Therefore, these identities did not provoke the same level of discussion or debate regarding sex or gender identity that Sally's case did (Noralla 2021b). With Sally, the debate primarily centred on the medical and religious considerations of the possibility of transitioning from one sex to another. One faction, comprising Sally's doctors and the prosecution office tasked with investigating her transition, coined the term "psychological hermaphrodite" to explain what is now recognised as gender dysphoria. They argued that Sally's transition was justified because her brain rejected her body and that without medical intervention, she would be at increased risk of suicide (Velayati 2016; Uddin 2017; Usep et al. 2020). Sally herself defended her position in various media appearances by employing this medicalisation narrative, asserting that

she was born with a deficit and did not violate any laws or ethical standards, whether they pertain to religion, the state, or the medical syndicate (Ghanem 2013).

Conversely, another faction, led by Al-Azhar University and the Medical Syndicate, vehemently opposed Sally's transition and sought to delegitimise the idea of the "psychological hermaphrodite" as a valid rationale for medical transition. They ultimately succeeded in obtaining a fatwa from the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,[2] Sheikh Tantawi,[3] in 1986, reaffirming that only individuals born with a "biological deficit," i.e., intersex[4] individuals, could medically transition. In contrast, those who experience mental distress and wish to transition for psychological reasons should seek therapy rather than surgical interventions. This ruling therefore excluded transgender individuals from access to gender-affirming medical care (Noralla 2023b).

Sally's narrative and the surrounding reactions foreshadowed the socio-religious and state-sanctioned violence that would be directed against transgender individuals in Egypt. Following her transition, Al-Azhar embarked on a campaign to delineate who was deemed deserving of access to gender-affirming healthcare. This effort culminated in the establishment by the Medical Syndicate, in 2003, of the first policy of violence against transgender individuals. The policy prohibited doctors from providing any medical treatments that would lead to "sex change," permitting only "sex correction" after conducting tests, including chromosomal assessments, to validate intersex status (Medical Syndicate 2003). Al-Azhar ensured that it was represented on the committee responsible for approving individuals for these medical treatments, effectively gatekeeping to prevent transgender individuals from accessing any official government-sponsored medical services (Noralla 2023b).

In addition to this policy of medical violence, Egyptian authorities have employed arbitrary interpretations of morality laws, such as Law 10/1961 and Law 175/2018,[5] to arrest and prosecute transgender individuals, subjecting them to mistreatment tantamount to torture while in detention, including forced anal examinations (Hamid 2017). Similarly, Egyptian authorities have enforced Al-Azhar's interpretations regarding legal gender recognition, which primarily pertain to intersex individuals, with the judiciary and the Ministry

of Interior acting as gatekeepers in determining who qualifies (Chahine 2023). The existence of legal documents that do not align with transgender individuals' gender identity renders them more vulnerable to social violence, including denial of access to housing, employment, education, and healthcare (Noralla, 2022). It is evident that the current status of transgender individuals in Egypt is characterised by multilayered, intersectional structures of violence that perpetuate a vicious cycle, confining them to a status akin to second-class citizens.

Research that addresses the experiences of transgender individuals with violence through empirical participatory methods has emerged over the past two decades. Initially, these studies focused on Western experiences of violence before expanding to regions such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, among others (Shamrock et al. 2024; Veras de Sousa Mascena et al. 2024; Hiner, Garrido and Walters 2019; Stotzer 2009). While Egypt is unequivocally recognised as an African nation, its cultural, religious, and social evolution has fostered a closer alignment with its Arabic-speaking neighbours than with other countries on the continent. This alignment frequently results in Egypt being categorised within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, owing to its substantial geopolitical, cultural, and religious significance in this specific area. However, in Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region, such studies have been limited; only a few have appeared in recent years, primarily on migration studies, specifically concerning the experiences of transgender asylum seekers and refugees (Hale 2009). Notable contributions include Fadi Saleh's "Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey" (2020), and Nisrine Chaer's "*Fadh, Sharaf* and Respectable Passing as New Frameworks for Understanding Transmasculinity in the MENA Region: Case Studies of Transmasculine Refugees in Lebanon" (2023). Another study that examines migration from an employment perspective is Kausar Yasmeen et al.'s article titled "GCC Transgender Labor Market Outcomes in GCC" (2024).

Lebanon represents an anomaly within the region, with its growing body of work on transgender experiences, particularly about healthcare and HIV. This includes Rachel L. Kaplan et al.'s studies on HIV prevalence and the demographic determinants of condomless receptive anal intercourse

among trans feminine individuals in Beirut (Kaplan, Veerina and El Khoury 2019; Kaplan, McGowan and Wagner 2016), as well as Wael Abdallah et al.'s "The Gender Affirming Surgery in a Conservative Religious Country: The Lebanese Experience" (2023). All these studies engage with the subject of violence against transgender individuals, whether through the lens of migration, asylum, conflict, or healthcare.

Unlike Lebanon, Egypt, the focus of this study, has only two studies that use empirical participatory research to explore the experiences of transgender individuals: Nora Noralla's (2024) "Access Denied: A Qualitative Study on Transgender Health Policy in Egypt" and Sophia Sherif's (2020) "Transgender Visibility/Invisibility: Navigating Cisnormative Structures and Discourses." Both studies are qualitative; the former addresses health-related violence against transgender individuals and the latter examines social violence and lived experiences.

Beyond these examples of empirical research, literature on transgender issues has largely been dominated by legal analyses of Islamic law and judicial decisions pertaining to transgender individuals. This body of literature primarily examines how contemporary Sharia interacts with the concept of "transgenderism" as an illness and often lacks an analysis of transgender identity or experience beyond this framework (Dabash 2023; Alipour 2017; Skovgaard-Peterson 1995). This literature exists in both Arabic and English, with findings that differ according to language. The Arabic literature tends to promote conversion therapy as the sole method for addressing transgender individuals' mental disorders, effectively advocating for interpretations of Sharia that prohibit gender-affirming healthcare (Helely 2019; Salah Almanaa et al. 2020). In contrast, the English-language literature is generally more accepting of transgender individuals, suggesting that Islam can accommodate everyone, including transgender individuals (Alipour 2017; Jean Veneuse 2019; Saqer 2018; Zaharin and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2020).

While there has been a slow expansion of transgender literature in Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region, empirical participatory research remains limited; it is either geographically restricted to Lebanon or thematically centred on migration and health. The present study aims to address this gap by employing qualitative participatory research methods to

examine transgender individuals' experiences with violence from an intersectional perspective. It seeks to elucidate how anti-transgender structures operate within the Egyptian context to perpetrate multilayered forms of violence against transgender individuals. This study seeks to answer two primary questions: How do transgender individuals perceive their identities? Additionally, how do violent anti-transgender structures operate and shape the experiences of transgender individuals as they navigate these challenges?

I use Egypt as a case study for Arabic-speaking MENA countries, given its unique position as a reflection of transgender experiences within the region. Egypt is home to some of the most prominent Sunni Islamic institutions globally, and its scholars are considered authoritative references for many Muslims.[6] Additionally, Egypt boasts the largest population among MENA countries, and its media content, including films, television series, and newspapers, has significantly shaped cultural narratives in the region over recent decades. Consequently, Egypt can provide valuable insights into the realities of transgender experiences within the region. However, it is crucial to recognise that each context is distinct, and this paper should serve only as an initial exploration of the issue.

## Engaging a Marginalised Community in a Sensitive Security Context

For an extended period, the academic community regarded insider research with scepticism, operating under the assumption that only outsider research could ensure academic objectivity (Fleming 2018). However, this perspective has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly in contexts where insider research constitutes the sole viable method for conducting investigations (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). This transformation is particularly evident in studies involving transgender individuals, who come together and form unique communities that are marginalised. Transgender persons frequently encounter stigma and criminalisation which impels their invisibility in public spaces and complicates their accessibility to external researchers. These circumstances have generated suspicion among Egyptian

transgender individuals towards outsiders seeking to conduct interviews, as extensive questioning may be perceived as intrusive or even interrogative.

Moreover, academic freedom in Egypt has experienced a notable decline in recent decades due to the increasingly authoritarian characteristics of the current military regime (Zain-Al-Dien 2016; Lindsey 2012; Fathy 2018). This regime has intensified its control over research institutions, thereby creating barriers for researchers interested in exploring subjects deemed taboo or illicit within the Egyptian context. Documented instances of legal harassment, arrest, conviction, and extrajudicial killings of both Egyptian and foreign researchers underscore the perilous environment for academic inquiry. A salient example is the case of Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old PhD student from Italy affiliated with Cambridge University, who was conducting field research on labour unions in Egypt at the time of his abduction and murder by state agents in 2019 (Saliba 2022). Other similar cases include those of Walid Salim, who was researching the Egyptian judiciary; Ahamed Samir, who focused on sexual and reproductive rights; and Patrick Zaki, who studied Christian minorities. All three were arrested and forcibly disappeared before reappearing at the National Security Public Prosecutor's Office charged with joining a terrorist group, among other accusations. They each spent time in prison without ever standing trial before being released, only to be confronted with travel bans. These cases represent just a few of the numerous incidents in which academics and researchers have encountered backlash for investigating topics that would reveal the country's severe human rights violations and the decline of the rule of law. The range of research topics that may lead to imprisonment or harm in Egypt is extensive (Abramson 2019).

Transgender issues are among the sensitive topics expressly frowned upon as a research focus, which effectively criminalises transgender identities. The Egyptian regime has faced substantial criticism for its persecution of this population. In light of these contextual challenges, I undertook two critical tasks: mitigating the risks associated with conducting gender research in Egypt and ensuring the safety of study participants. Engaging with transgender communities in Egypt and similar contexts necessitates extensive trust-building, often over several years, before community members are willing to participate. Establishing trust involves identifying the locations of

transgender individuals in Egypt, a task that often demands insider connections which many researchers lack. Many transgender Egyptians communicate solely in Arabic, which presents further challenges for Western researchers who lack proficiency in the local language (Sheblaq et al. 2019).

These conditions likely account for the limited participation of Egyptian transgender individuals in research, with the exception of the two already cited participatory empirical studies conducted by insiders. In my case, I occupy a position of privilege, having dedicated the past decade to transgender issues in the region and being a member of the Egyptian transgender community. Consequently, I drew upon pre-existing access to the transgender community and extended invitations to individual members to participate in this study. I used personal and professional networks to facilitate this engagement and employed secure social media platforms for direct communication. Furthermore, I relied on secure telecommunications to discuss sensitive topics related to the research and to conduct interviews (Brayda and Boyce 2014).

My relocation from Egypt to a Western country provides an added layer of security, allowing me to conduct and publish this research without fear of state persecution. While I recognise the privilege associated with my current situation, it is crucial to acknowledge that I began from a position of disadvantage, akin to that of the interviewed participants. Therefore, I endeavour to leverage my current privilege to amplify the voices of fellow transgender activists, community members, and scholars who may still find themselves in the disadvantaged positions I once experienced (Aburn, Gott and Hoare 2023).

Throughout the research process, I engaged in critical reflection regarding my privilege and positionality both within and outside academia (Adam 2013). My ability to be publicly identified with the research as well as to be known for carrying out this type of research is a consequence of a forced choice. As perceived by the study participants, this is a privilege which allows me to reside abroad, express my gender identity freely, and carry out my work without harassment from the state or society. While some may view exile as a form of disadvantage, many transgender individuals consider it aspirational, provided it facilitates their ability to express themselves without

constraint. Consequently, during interviews or focus groups, discussions often diverged from predetermined questions to explore potential avenues for immigration. These topics were familiar to me; as an activist, I recognised that many participants were beneficiaries of my grassroots programmes. Thus, a sense of solidarity developed between the study participants and me, fostering an environment conducive to open discussion on matters pertinent to this research and transgender issues more broadly.

A total of 15 participants from diverse backgrounds took part in this research, with seven identifying as trans women, two as trans men, three as non-binary, and two as having identities outside the Western spectrum. All participants provided oral informed consent, and their involvement was entirely voluntary. The interview questions were qualitative and open-ended, allowing participants to respond to and elaborate on topics of personal significance. Responding to me as an insider, participants expressed greater comfort in sharing additional information, believing that my familiarity and understanding of their context encouraged openness.

At the same time, as an insider, I risk allowing my own experiences and pre-existing beliefs to influence the interviews or research findings. Therefore, reflexive thinking was integral to my research endeavour. The primary objective of this study was to elaborate on the perspectives of marginalised and understudied communities rather than merely reflect on my personal experiences. To facilitate open and unrestricted dialogue, I adopted a minimally interventionist approach during interviews and focus group sessions, assuming the role of a listening observer. The insights derived from these interactions serve as the foundation for this research, with the literature review providing a contextual framework that highlights the various challenges faced by transgender individuals in Egypt. Thus, this research project represents a concerted effort to comprehend the complexities of transgender experiences of violence as elucidated through the narratives shared during interviews and focus groups, with a view to amplifying the voices of those who are frequently silenced by the state and society or rendered invisible by ongoing academic research.

## Voices from the Community: What Is Transgender?

Establishing a definitive definition of the term "transgender" in Egypt poses significant challenges. This study aims to highlight perspectives from the Egyptian transgender community, which may employ terminology that differs from that used in Western societies or apply similar terms with distinct meanings, thereby enabling individuals to perceive themselves from alternative vantage points. Throughout the course of interviews, participants actively engaged in discussions regarding their understanding of transgender identity in Egypt and its broader implications for the transgender community at large. It is essential to acknowledge that the term "community" is used loosely here, as transgender individuals in Egypt belong to diverse social, economic, religious, and political groups, leading to varying experiences contingent upon group affiliation. Consequently, transgender experiences in Egypt are not monolithic; however, they do exhibit considerable intersectionality. Participants recognised that their experiences are unique to their specific contexts and differ significantly from those of individuals who identify as transgender in Western nations or countries with more extensive transgender rights. Ultimately, participants articulated three distinct definitions of the term "transgender."

The first definition aligns with the pathologisation of "transsexualism" that predominated in Western contexts before the emergence of depathologised definitions of transgender as an identity rather than a mental illness (Castro-Peraza et al. 2019). For participants within this framework, being transgender equates to being transsexual; it is perceived merely as a medicalised "journey" or "phase" from one binary to another. Participants expressed the belief that being transgender is a mental illness, or "because something is wrong with you." One participant articulated their rationale for this perspective as follows:

> It is not an identity or a choice; it was forced on me. I do not know about others, but I doubt anyone in Egypt would choose to have such a miserable life where you are outside the binary and everyone considers you immoral. This identity talk works for people in the West, where they have fundamental human rights, not here.[7]

The sentiment that it was "forced on me" was frequently articulated by participants to describe gender identity disorder as an inherent condition, one that they perceived to be beyond their control, rather than a choice. They often expressed this notion by stating that it was something they "were born with." This sentiment was echoed by the majority of participants, who agreed that being transgender is perceived more as a curse from which they cannot escape, rendering them immoral outcasts in society.

The second definition, which represented a minority viewpoint, originated from individuals who self-identified as activists or belonged to the upper class, which affords them greater exposure to Western culture. This group conceptualises being transgender as "the ability to identify and express oneself in any gender identity one wishes to adopt." However, even this group acknowledges the limitations of applying this definition within the Egyptian context, as prevailing conditions do not permit non-binary gender expressions. They also recognise that this definition is not widely accepted within the Egyptian transgender community, where the majority maintain that they are binary and transitioning due to mental illness. One participant from this group stated:

> Look, for me, being transgender is just feeling a certain gender expression, but I know there are many limitations on that in Egypt. Although I identify as trans-non-binary myself, I must maintain a binary expression most of the time because the conditions do not allow me to do otherwise. I also know that most transgender people in Egypt are transsexual and believe in pathologising.[8]

The third group consisted of two individuals and provided the most intriguing discussion. They were sex workers who identified themselves as "ladyboy" and "shemale." When asked whether they consider themselves trans women, they stated that they do not, asserting that they are simply men who take hormones and dress femininely for work:

> I would not say I am a trans woman, a woman, or whatever label. I am a man who is feminine for work. I prefer being called a ladyboy because I am a lady and a boy.[9]

This group may be regarded as the most gender-nonconforming among the three, as its members identified as men while simultaneously embracing a feminine gender expression. Notably, one individual even pursued hormone replacement therapy. While participants claimed to adopt a feminine

appearance solely for professional reasons, the potential influence of their social class and limited exposure to Western or medical terminologies cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, when questioned about their use of terms such as "ladyboy" and "shemale," participants explained that these labels best encapsulate their identity and are familiar to their clientele, who perceive them as "women with male genitalia." Consequently, the use of such terminology aids them in attracting a broader client base.

The dynamics among the three groups are noteworthy. For instance, the first group perceived itself as the most legitimate representation of transgender identity. Some members were protective of this label and did not think it should be extended to those who do not undergo gender-affirming healthcare because this devalues their experiences:

> Do you want to tell me anyone can be transgender? I refuse to believe that. You cannot just wake up and decide to be transgender. It is a journey that involves changing your sex with medical means. Otherwise, you are not truly transgender.[10]

The second group acknowledged that their narrative on gender identity is often dismissed, as most members of the community prioritise more pressing concerns such as finding employment, accessing gender-affirming healthcare, and facing familial violence, rather than engaging with perspectives on gender. Thus, despite increasing awareness within the transgender community, discussions surrounding gender identity remain limited in scope. Additionally, a notable dynamic exists between individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB) and those assigned female at birth (AFAB). Most participants, 13 out of 15, were AMAB, which reflects the conservative nature of Egyptian society. Greater restrictions on mobility and independence are imposed on individuals AFAB since they are often perceived as potential sources of family dishonour. Consequently, they are closely monitored, which complicates their ability to transition if they wish. In contrast, AMAB individuals generally enjoy greater freedom of movement and independence due to their privileged status as perceived "males" within the patriarchal framework of Egyptian society. Nonetheless, the predominance of AMAB individuals in this sample does not imply that trans AFAB individuals are not a significant part of transgender communities; rather, it reflects a limitation in the sample's representation. Furthermore, AFAB individuals may experience a higher

likelihood of familial and societal acceptance if they transition to male, given the patriarchal values that tend to favour males over females in Egyptian society (Hajjaj 2020).

Finally, the third group felt the most marginalised due to their profession, as members of the other two groups, particularly the first, viewed them with suspicion:

> Other transgender people like to blame us for everything. You cannot see Dr. X anymore? It must be because of us. Are the police harassing you? It must be because of us. The idea is that we are giving a bad name to transgender people because now society thinks that all trans women are sex workers. However, you know what? From my experience, many transgender people are secretly sex workers but too ashamed to tell anyone.[11]

This critique of the moral high ground by transgender sex workers can be interpreted as their reproach to non-sex worker transgender individuals who seek socio-religious validation by distancing themselves from members of society perceived as the most deviant and immoral. Nonetheless, all groups concurred that pathologising represents the only viable approach for survival as a transgender person in Egypt, given that the State, religion, and society do not recognise any identities beyond the binary, including intersex individuals who are often coerced into undergoing surgeries to conform to binary norms. For transgender individuals, existing outside the binary within the Egyptian context could be perceived as suicidal, as it leads to consistent social, familial, and state violence against them. Individuals who are perceived as queer in their public expressions are particularly vulnerable to the multilayered forms of violence. The groups also agreed that society exclusively acknowledges one definition – transsexuality – rather than transgender identity. Society recognises only transsexual individuals who pursue gender-affirming healthcare "due to illness."

All groups agreed that to garner acceptance within Egyptian society, one must identify solely as transsexual. This entails acquiring the physical and social characteristics of the opposite sex and effectively fulfilling the newly acquired binary gender role. Ultimately, all groups concurred that despite this rigid social circumscription, defining what it means to be transgender in Egypt is not straightforward, as experiences vary considerably from person to person based on their individual circumstances. Some factors identified by

the groups as influencing the transgender experience include biological sex (male or female), social class, familial acceptance, economic empowerment, level of education, and social connections.

## Violent Experiences

In discussions regarding the definition of "transgender," it became apparent that most participants associated this term with experiences of suffering and violence. They underscored the social and legal harassment encountered by individuals who deviate from the heteronormative binary. As previously outlined, transgender individuals face multilayered forms of violence that intersect to shape their experiences. Participants highlighted violence arising from the denial of fundamental human rights pertaining to employment, healthcare, housing and legal gender recognition, as well as subjection to state and social violence. They identified three primary phases during which transgender individuals are particularly vulnerable to violence:

> A. The coming-out phase, during which individuals risk familial violence and bullying in educational settings due to their desire to transition. They often encounter significant challenges in persuading family members that gender-affirming healthcare constitutes the most appropriate course of action. If rejected by their families, they must seek alternative sources of support.
>
> B. The in-between phase, characterised by the initiation of therapy and gender-affirming healthcare even though individuals are still far from achieving their desired gender presentation. This phase renders individuals particularly susceptible to social and state harassment due to their visible non-conformity.
>
> C. The final phase, in which individuals have completed their medical transition but must await the outcome of their legal gender recognition application.

While not all transgender persons may experience these three phases, there was a consensus among participants that these phases are typically encountered by "transsexuals" in Egypt. All participants reported navigating at least the initial phase of coming out to their families, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Some individuals were outed due to familial pressure and surveillance rather than by their own volition. A common experience cited by all was the social and legal harassment associated with their non-binary gender expression. They emphasised that those who do not conform to the

binary gender model are the most vulnerable throughout the transitioning process. Furthermore, transgender individuals who can pass as cisgender generally face fewer challenges compared to those who cannot. There is a lack of precise data regarding legal violence against transgender individuals; however, several local organisations have compiled information on the prosecution of LGBT+ individuals in Egypt. The primary legal instrument used in these cases is the anti-sex work law, number 10/1961. Additional laws invoked include public morality clauses found within the penal code and the new cybercrime law, number 175/2018 (Noralla 2021c).[12]

The majority of those arrested are queer AMABs, with trans women and cisgender queer men being the primary targets. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Freedoms, between 2013 and 2017, at least 232 individuals were arrested based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; they faced prison sentences that ranged from six months to three years (Hamid 2017). In 2018, a significant crackdown was initiated following the display of a rainbow flag by activists at a rock concert in Cairo. This resulted in the arrest of 85 individuals within three months, which marked the most severe security crackdown against LGBT+ individuals in the nation's history (Ghoshal 2018).

In 2019, local organisations documented 92 arrests, while in 2022, the number decreased to 43, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Freedoms (ElShekh 2023). In a context where NGOs' access to cases varies, the apparent decrease does not conclusively indicate a decline in the actual number of arrests. Items used by trans women to conform to societal gender norms, such as wigs and dresses, are often presented as evidence against them; potential sentences ranged from several months to multiple years, if convicted. During detention, transgender individuals frequently endure mistreatment that amounts to torture, including verbal abuse, sexual violence, and physical assaults. Additionally, transgender individuals may be subjected to prolonged solitary confinement due to discrepancies between their gender expression and legal identification documents. The perpetrators of such violence often include law enforcement officers and other inmates who are frequently encouraged by officers (Noralla 2021c). One participant recounted being arbitrarily detained for several days due to the mismatch between his legal identification and gender expression.

> In late 2019, I was returning home from work when a [police patrol] detained me. My heart sank; I anticipated a request for my identification. Upon presenting my ID to the officer, he verbally assaulted me, exclaiming, "Do you think I am stupid?" He subsequently ordered my arrest. At the police station, I endured physical abuse before being confined to an officer's office, where I was interrogated and informed that I would be required to spend several nights in a male detention facility to learn to conform to my assigned sex. I was placed in a cell with thirty men, and the officers instructed them to "have fun" at my expense. I was subjected to physical violence, sexual assault, and humiliation, including being urinated on. Four days later, I was released after a lawyer from a non-governmental organization presented documentation to the public prosecution office that validated my gender identity disorder.[13]

Medical violence represents a significant concern for transgender individuals in Egypt. Participants identified two predominant responses from parents of transgender children: the application of corporal punishment to enforce adherence to traditional gender roles and the imposition of conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a widespread and accepted practice among medical professionals in Egypt, with numerous physicians claiming they can "cure" transgender individuals and revert them to their biological sex (Schapiro and Gebeily 2021). One participant recounted:

> My parents observed that I exhibited behaviours typical of girls and engaged primarily with female peers during my childhood. Consequently, they sought the opinions of a neurologist and a psychiatrist to ascertain the underlying issues. Both professionals concluded that I exhibited certain character developmental issues that rendered me more effeminate. They determined that this condition could be treated with a combination of male hormones and extensive therapy sessions to restore my masculinity.[14]

Medical practitioners who endorse conversion therapy frequently exacerbate familial violence against transgender children by convincing parents that their child is "curable," and attributing any lack of progress to the child's alleged non-compliance. One participant articulated:

> My doctor's approach did not persuade me, prompting me to conduct an online search, which led me to discover that I have a Gender Identity Disorder. When I communicated to my parents my decision to discontinue seeing that psychiatrist, they reacted with panic; my mother was in tears, and my father was shouting, all praying for me to regain my senses. Ultimately, I felt compelled to leave home, as they were convinced that I was rejecting treatment.[15]

Survivors of conversion therapy who seek access to gender-affirming healthcare and appropriate therapeutic support encounter significant barriers. As previously noted, Al-Azhar has obstructed transgender individuals from obtaining gender-affirming healthcare through the sole official avenue, the sex correction committee. Consequently, transgender individuals are forced to turn to the underground market for essential healthcare services. An underground market consisting of private clinics, physicians, and psychiatrists has emerged to exploit this void, driven not by genuine concern for transgender individuals but by profit motives (Noralla 2021a).

Due to the limited number of medical professionals willing to accept transgender patients, these providers are not regulated by standardised pricing. Fees fluctuate based on patients' appearance or mannerisms; individuals perceived as more affluent may be charged higher fees. A physician's consultation can range from 400 to 1,500 EGP (approximately US$7,92–US$29,70). Monthly hormone therapy may cost 300 EGP (around US$5,94), while surgical procedures can vary from 50,000 to 100,000 EGP (approximately US$991,00–US$1,979.75).[16, 17]

Even those who have the privilege of accessing gender-affirming healthcare are not free from risk. The underground clinics providing such services frequently lack adequately trained personnel and are ill-equipped to deliver appropriate medical care. In 2021, a 26-year-old man named Ezz died due to medical complications following an early discharge from surgery. Given the "illegal" nature of the treatment, there was no documentation, which made it difficult to pursue justice for Ezz (Noralla 2021a).

For individuals who successfully navigate their transition, a significant challenge persists: the acquisition of legal gender recognition. In Egypt, the process for obtaining legal gender recognition is predominantly arbitrary and devoid of a formal legal framework. The quest to amend one's identification documents can engender considerable distress and anxiety for transgender individuals, as the state enforces conditions that spell precarity for their livelihoods. To apply for legal gender recognition, individuals are required to have fully transitioned, yet there is no guarantee that their documents will accurately represent their identity. While some individuals obtain approval from the civil registry and can amend their documentation with relative ease,

others face protracted judicial processes involving forensic examinations and extensive investigations by authorities. As one interviewee articulated:

> It is akin to Russian roulette, highly dependent on one's connections or ability to pass convincingly. Officials are unlikely to deny an application from a muscular man or an attractive woman. Conversely, if one lacks connections, obtaining document amendments can prove exceedingly challenging, resulting in a life spent in legal limbo, which is profoundly detrimental.[18]

Should the civil registry deny an application, the transgender individual may seek a judicial appeal in the administrative courts. However, these courts have consistently made unfavourable rulings, often based on narrow interpretations of Sharia as it pertains to transgender individuals. For instance, in 2016, Cairo's administrative court dismissed a legal gender recognition application filed by a trans man, asserting that he was classified as transgender rather than intersex; thus, his transition was deemed invalid under Sharia law:

> An examination of the fatwas related to this topic reveals that scholars have clearly prohibited individuals from undergoing sex change operations, allowing sex correction procedures only in cases of biological necessity. The plaintiff violated Sharia by undergoing sex change surgery, as she was born a healthy female and did not require surgical intervention. Even in cases of gender identity disorder, it is argued that treatment should focus on mental health support rather than physical alterations (Noralla 2023b).

Without the ability to change one's gender identification, individuals who have visibly socially or medically transitioned to the opposite sex confront interconnected forms of violence. Housing is a significant issue discussed by the participants, the majority of whom had already transitioned or were socially living outside the gender expectations associated with their sex assigned at birth and did not reside with their families. Being denied the basic right to housing is perceived by the participants as a fundamental factor contributing to the violence they experience. Participants reported being denied housing once landlords discovered their transgender status, often through the examination of their identification. One strategy used by participants to circumvent this discrimination is to ask a friend to lease a property on their behalf using their identification or to attempt to present

themselves to landlords as their sex assigned at birth. As one participant articulated:

> You simply cannot rent a place as a transgender person. The moment landlords discover that you are transgender, they start praying to Allah for forgiveness for even interacting with you. Your only hope is to ask someone to rent a place for you or to find a room in a supportive apartment.[19]

Regarding housing, some of the challenges that confront trans women are similar to those encountered by other women in the country. One of these relates to violence associated with living independently. In Egypt, women generally experience greater difficulty in renting accommodation for themselves, as well as harassment from neighbours and suspicion of being sex workers. Trans women encounter similar issues, with an increased risk of exposure due to being automatically labelled as "criminals." Trans women participants discussed how neighbours monitored them to ensure their "decency" and to ascertain that they are not sex workers. One participant recounted an incident where a neighbour reported her to the police solely because she lived alone and, according to the neighbour, dressed "provocatively."

> I suddenly found individuals vigorously knocking on my door. Upon opening it, I was met with the sight of numerous residents from the building and a police officer standing directly before me. He inquired whether I lived alone, and upon my affirmative response, he immediately requested to enter and examine my documentation. When I questioned the rationale behind this request, asking if it was illegal for me to reside alone, he responded that it was illegal to engage in prostitution and forcibly pushed me inside. Consequently, they deduced my transgender identity, and I was subsequently accused of being an imposter who seduces men for immoral purposes. I was taken to a police station while the entire building directed curses at me. I was released later that same day, yet I could not retrieve my belongings for fear of being assaulted.[20]

In addition to housing, another critical aspect of violence stemming from the incongruence between one's identification documents and gender expression pertains to employment. Without stable employment, individuals are unable to secure the financial resources for gender-affirming healthcare, housing, education, or basic living expenses, particularly as the majority of participants lack access to familial financial support. Consequently, economic violence constitutes a significant source of anxiety and instability for transgender

individuals, who often perceive themselves as akin to being on a hamster wheel, striving to earn sufficient funds for daily survival while struggling to save enough for transition-related costs. The economic violence faced by transgender individuals, already pronounced, is exacerbated by the absence of familial support for transition-related expenses. Egypt is currently confronting severe economic challenges which have resulted in a substantial devaluation of its currency. The inflation rate stands at 40%, with the minimum wage for government employees set at 3,500 EGP (US$69,29) per month, while the average wage is 4,480 EGP (US$88,69) per month, ranking among the lowest in the MENA region. Yet such salaries remain unattainable for many transgender individuals in Egypt, who encounter significant barriers in securing employment.

The disparity between one's gender identity and legal identification can lead to automatic disqualification from numerous employment opportunities. Some individuals are fortunate enough to have received adequate education, which enables them to access the international job market and secure well-paying online positions. For others, however, sex work is the sole viable means of financing their transition (Noralla 2023a). One participant stated:

> To be honest, you cannot transition with Egyptian salaries. The costs are enormous; you may have a family who will pay, or you may find an online job. One option many take is sex work. I started doing sex work when I was 20 to support myself after I had to leave home. It is a dangerous profession; you can encounter horrible clients and face the security risk of arrest. However, it was worth it; I managed to complete one surgery, and now I am saving to undergo the others.[21]

Interconnected forms of violence converge to shape the experiences of transgender individuals, creating what appears to be a cycle. This violence begins within the family, which may either disown them or attempt to convert them; it extends to medical violence manifested in the denial of access to gender-affirming healthcare, the exploitation of their needs in underground markets, or the commodification of conversion efforts. Furthermore, it encompasses legal violence, manifested through detentions, torture, and the denial of legal gender recognition. Ultimately, individuals are driven into a state of legal limbo, wherein they are unable to lead a functional daily life due

to the discrepancies between their identification documents and their gender expression. This results in marginalisation and poverty, with individuals unable to access basic necessities, such as housing, and reliant on the informal economy or sex work for survival. While access to education may also be hindered, the majority of participants transitioned after or near the completion of their education and managed to continue their studies at either technical or university levels. Consequently, educational violence was not discussed as extensively as medical, legal, economic, and housing violence.

Among all the conditions discussed, it is not surprising that during the interviews and focus group discussions, conversations frequently turned to immigration, particularly avenues for seeking asylum abroad. None of the participants, including those who continued to live as their sex assigned at birth, expressed a willingness to remain in Egypt. If the opportunity arose, they declared, they would leave to "be able to live the way they want." As holders of Egyptian passports, which are among the least powerful passports globally, and as individuals coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, they face limited options for immigration, and they primarily rely on the chance of obtaining a tourist visa or the fortunate ability to acquire the language skills necessary to apply for scholarships to study abroad. Discussions regarding these avenues often revealed the frustrations of most participants, who felt that all opportunities were being closed off to them, rendering even immigration seemingly unattainable. As one participant declared:

> Look, I know Europe isn't perfect, but anything would be better than the life we have here, to be honest. I would say all of us are tired; tired of being outcasts, tired of chasing after a penny, tired of being afraid to go out, just tired of living, you know. We want to live, and any place in Europe would be better than here.[22]

All participants were aware of individuals, aside from me, who had emigrated. While all acknowledged that applying for asylum, for instance, would entail hardships such as living in camps or recounting their emotional narratives to authorities in a host country, they still firmly believed that leaving was the only viable path forward. This highlights how the multilayered anti-transgender structures of violence have driven many transgender individuals in the country to a critical juncture, where the only perceived solution is emigration. While this perception is justified, participants also noted that life

in Egypt could be more manageable under two conditions: i) if they could pass as cisgender, and ii) if they could successfully alter their official documents. Otherwise, it becomes exhausting to continue navigating the forms of violence they face daily.

## Conclusion

When I began this research, my goal was to create a platform for Egyptian transgender individuals to share their experiences. However, I quickly realised that such experiences are difficult to capture fully in a single academic paper. The existence of transgender individuals in Egypt is complex and multilayered. While this study highlights the violence that shapes these experiences, it is important to recognise that there are also narratives of innovation, activism, and survival. Additionally, most participants are AMABs, leaving the experiences of AFAB transgender individuals somewhat invisible. Nonetheless, this study lays the groundwork for future research by introducing new aspects of transgender experiences in Egypt and similar contexts across Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region. It also highlights the lack of empirical participatory research in Egypt, which requires an insider connection to navigate the challenges of engaging with a marginalised community in a sensitive security context.

Through self-reflection, I question my motivations for this research. Am I driven by guilt from my privileged position compared to other transgender individuals? Am I motivated to amplify unheard voices? Is this engagement a way to better understand my identity through dialogues with participants? Or does my activist background inspire me to conduct research that assists transgender individuals in Egypt in reclaiming their rights? While I may not have clear answers to these questions, the following points are evident: my commitment to human rights, my identity as a transgender person from the MENA region, and my awareness of my privilege compared to my past life in Egypt drive my work as an academic researcher. They influence my research priorities, shaping my focus on issues I see as essential for transgender individuals in Egypt and the broader region. At the same time, these personal connections highlight the need for me to detach myself

from the research and allow participants to guide the study's direction and outcomes.

This study examined how transgender individuals experience their transhood. While the global transgender movement advocates for rights based on self-determination and depathologisation, many participants in Egypt identify as "transsexuals," transitioning from one binary to another, with pathologisation serving as both a medical framework and a survival strategy. Many transgender individuals in Egypt view gender-affirming healthcare as essential for surviving the anti-transgender structures that impede their lives. By transitioning medically and conforming to heteronormative identities, they create a protective barrier against violence. However, gender-affirming healthcare does not protect transgender individuals from legal violence, as medical transitions must be accompanied by legal changes. Thus, the most effective survival strategy for transgender individuals appears to be to fully embrace their desired gender identity and transition both medically and legally. This explains why the term transgender is often equated with transsexuality; even those identifying as non-binary find expressing gender non-conformity nearly impossible in Egypt. Participants identified moments of not passing, or the "in-betweener phase," as times of heightened vulnerability to violence due to their gender non-conformity. However, conforming to heteronormative gender roles does not protect transgender individuals from all violence since such conformity does not erase the prior experience of violence arising from family rejection of a person's transition.

Delineating transgender experiences in Egypt remains complex. For some, transitioning between binary genders defines their journey, while for others the quest is to create identities outside the gender binary. Common elements contribute to a collective experience, including self-discovery, self-acceptance, familial and societal conflicts, anti-transgender violence, and legal harassment. Although these shared elements may depict transgender experiences as marked by victimhood, they ultimately reflect resilience, survival, and resistance.

Transgender individuals persist in existing and occupying both public and private spaces despite pervasive anti-transgender violence that threatens to erase them by enforcing a biological binary. The act of existing is in itself a

significant form of resistance in the Egyptian context. Transgender visibility has grown in recent decades and is expected to continue expanding. While transgender experiences in Egypt remain deeply rooted in a binary framework and are pathologised at multiple levels, opportunities exist for individuals to challenge and subvert cis-heteronormative binaries. Despite the dominance of the binary, which is undeniable, there remains room for coexistence and the exploration of alternative gender identities within the Egyptian transgender landscape.

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## Notes

1. Gender-affirming healthcare, as articulated by the World Health Organization, includes a comprehensive array of social, psychological, behavioural, and medical interventions that are specifically intended to support and affirm an individual's gender identity, particularly in instances where it diverges from the gender assigned at birth.
2. Al-Azhar Al-Sharif is the foremost Islamic scholarly authority and the largest religious institution in Egypt. It is considered an important scholarly reference on Sunni Islamic jurisprudence worldwide and has a far-reaching impact beyond Egypt.
3. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy (referred to as Shaikh Tantawy) was Egypt's Grand Mufti between 1986 and 1996.

4. Intersex people are individuals born with sex characteristics that vary from what is typical for female and male bodies. In contrast, transgender people are individuals whose gender expression/identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth.
5. Law 10/1961 predominantly functions as an anti-sex work statute; however, it has also been employed to target transgender individuals assigned male at birth under the charge of debauchery, as outlined in Article 9(C). Similarly, Law 175/2018, which is categorised as a cybercrime law, has been used to target marginalised groups, including transgender individuals, through the charge of violating family values, as stipulated in Article 25 of the legislation.
6. Egypt, notable for housing the prominent Al-Azhar institution, has played a critical role in influencing contemporary transgender policy and law in the region through its fatwas and scholarly opinions. Furthermore, Egypt is recognised as a pioneer in the codification of Islamic fatwas and opinions into legal frameworks. Such codification first occurred in 2003, when the prohibition of gender-affirming healthcare was incorporated into the Medical Code of Ethics. Additionally, the rulings of the Egyptian judiciary on this issue have been extensively referenced throughout the region, thereby shaping legal interpretations regarding the status of transgender individuals, particularly in the context of legal gender recognition.
7. Interview 10 with a trans woman, 15 July 2023.
8. Interview 13 with a non-binary person, 28 July 2023.
9. Focus group 1 with trans sex workers, 13 March 2022.
10. Interview 3 with a trans woman, 27 February 2022.
11. Focus group 1 with trans sex workers, 13 March 2022.
12. The Egyptian vice police frequently target individuals AMABs who express themselves outside the traditional gender roles associated with males, as well as those engaged in sex work. Officially, to secure a conviction under these laws, it must be demonstrated that the arrested individuals are participating in sex work. Consequently, the police and public prosecution offices use items such as wigs, lingerie,

women's clothing, and other articles typically associated with trans women to construct a narrative suggesting involvement in sex work. This narrative often posits that the individual is a gay man using these items to seduce clients for monetary compensation.

13. Interview 14 with a trans woman, 12 March 2023.
14. Interview 11 with a trans woman, 11 July 2023.
15. Interview 9 with a trans man, 4 April 2023.
16. All conversion rates are according to the rate of 18 March 2025.
17. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.
18. Interview 9 with a trans man, 4 April 2023.
19. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.
20. Interview 10 with a trans woman, 15 July 2023.
21. Interview 12 with a trans woman, 20 July 2023.
22. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.

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# Messages of Gender-Based Violence: Reflections on the Politics of the Methodology of Conversations

Enzo Lenine and Naentrem Sanca

## Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive phenomenon in virtually all societies. It has garnered international attention in global fora and academia as a result of longstanding feminist struggles. From our grounding in feminist International Relations (IR), we reflect upon our experiences of researching GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. Our focus is on the messages conveyed by acts of violence that target women and feminised subjects, which constitute a system of communication of power and subordination with structural ramifications in society. The overall aim of the research is to unravel the meanings of gendered acts of violence in terms of existing power relations in these countries and as understood by a range of interlocutors, including survivors, activists, researchers, and government officials. Our investigation of the dynamics of acts of GBV has involved deeper feminist reflections on the politics of research and power relations. In this article, we focus on our methodological approach of using conversations as a means for enabling discussion and interpretation of power relations, with particular attention paid to our positionalities. In so doing, we seek to contribute to current reflections in feminist IR about positionalities, especially in research on GBV that is conducted in the Global South, and in Portuguese-speaking African countries, in particular.

**Keywords:** feminist International Relations, research positionality, Portuguese-speaking Africa, Global South epistemologies, postcolonial methodologies, survivor narratives

## Introduction

Feminist scholarship in International Relations (IR) has drawn attention to gender-based violence (GBV) since the 1970s, when the first international treaties were negotiated and eventually adopted. The United Nations Decade for Women, the major world Conferences on Women that it encompassed (Ghodsee 2010; Lenine and Oncampo 2021), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women were fundamental outcomes of feminist struggles that brought violence against women and GBV onto the global agenda. This international attention unleashed an interest in understanding the factors leading to acts of violence and abuse, as well as the processes of gendering violence itself (True 2012).

In the face of this global endeavour to understand and fight GBV, feminists working in the field of IR have not only researched the treaties and initiatives adopted by states and international organisations (Haastrup 2014; Shepherd 2008), but also explored the experiences of survivors, the motivations behind perpetrators' acts of violence, and the action (and inaction) of states and civil society (Baaz and Stern 2013; DeLargy 2013; Dolan et al. 2020; True 2012). A central goal in these investigations is to shed light on individuals' experiences (especially women's) and bring them into the international arena; echoing the core tenet of feminist IR: "the personal is international" (Enloe 2014).

Nevertheless, feminist international politics is still dominated by scholarship from the Global North, which has dictated the theoretical and empirical engagements with issues of interest. The well-known critiques by feminists in the Global South, notably those of Mama (2011), Mohanty (2003), and Spivak (1998), have sparked intense debates that have generated important changes in the way local stories of feminists in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific are told to international audiences. At the same time, research on the Global South still lacks serious engagement with local feminisms (Narayanaswamy 2016). African feminisms, in particular, have been largely ignored in international research on GBV on the continent, which raises questions about how one interprets local realities, and how one can go beyond simplistic interpretations of feminism in Africa (Ayiera 2010; Bennett 2010; Dosekun 2021; Lazreg 2005; Mekgwe 2006; Okech 2020;

Ossome 2020). Such interpretations are associated with "sensationalism, voyeurism, and exoticism" (Bunting and Quirk 2020, 7; see also Tamale 2011). They reproduce images and discourses that reaffirm the neocolonial dichotomies that still permeate global politics and that define Africa as a place for extraction of natural and human resources or for the entertainment of foreign audiences avid for sensational stories and simplistic framings of African realities (Autesserre 2012).

Our research project revolves around the gendered messages conveyed by acts of GBV (Sjoberg 2016a), which constitute a system of communication with structural ramifications in society (Lenine and Gonçalves 2021; Segato 2016). By identifying these messages, the conditions of their (re)production and the power relations they entail in individuals' and communities' discourses and practices, our aim is to unravel the meanings of acts of violence with a view to interrogating the discourse of international politics on GBV, which tends to focus on spectacularised forms of violence instead of their specific structural elements. Therefore, we pose the following research question: What gendered messages do acts of GBV convey? Our starting point is that GBV operates under a system of communication which, through the (re)enactment of acts of violence, dehumanises individuals, inscribing on their bodies the mandates of subordination that render women vulnerable (Segato 2016, 2019; Sjoberg 2016a). Gendered messages operate within and help constitute the social structures that sustain GBV but tend to be ignored in IR interventions on the issue, and, more broadly, in the international politics of gender. By addressing gendered messages of acts of violence, the research seeks to offer alternative understandings that extend this subject beyond the usual academic and political discourses on sexual violence.

Conducting research on GBV poses a variety of challenges, not only because the traumatic experiences faced by individuals make them sensitive about recalling the past, but also because the subject matter requires treating research as more than data collection or extraction. Questions of power and positionality are central in feminist inquiry about GBV, for they involve complex relationships between researcher and researched (Amoureux and Steele 2016). In other words, who we are and how we are positioned vis-à-vis the researched influence not only what we see, hear, and perceive, but more

fundamentally, what we conceive as an act of GBV and what it communicates in the broader picture of social relations. Therefore, one cannot approach the issue without reflecting upon the politics of methodology at play in this kind of feminist inquiry.

In this article, we seek to discuss the politics of methodology for researching GBV in Africa by reflecting upon our own methodological practices as researchers who are differently positioned with respect to African societies and how our methodological choices impact our research in Portuguese-speaking countries on the continent, namely, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. The latter are sites where research on GBV is in its infancy compared to other places in Africa (especially English-speaking parts of the continent). Our reflections aim to delve into the "concrete processes of methodologies" of researching in Africa: "*how* to imagine a 'field' (in an African context!) […] *how* to protect, respect, and be accountable to those with whom we work, *how* to select research foci and methodologies which are capable of dialogue with worlds we want to change" (Bennett 2008, 5, emphasis in original). All these questions underpinned our research project, entitled "Deciphering the Gendered Messages of Violence Against Women in Portuguese-Speaking Africa: A Comparative Analysis of GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau", conducted under the auspices of *Feminist Africa* and the "Violence, Gender and Power: Feminist Struggles around Violence Against Women" research consortium. We locate our discussion in the field of IR, not only because our research aims to bring local insights to the international politics of GBV, but also because in IR, declarations of positionality have come to prominence in certain methodological debates (Amoureux and Steele 2016; Gani and Khan 2024).

Unravelling the messages of GBV requires engaging with different agents in society, such as survivors, activists, government officials, and NGOs, via a conversational approach. Conversations have long been a useful methodological approach in feminist research, but their use raises issues of power and positionality. As Soedirgo and Glas (2020, 528) argue, "[o]ur positionality is not reducible to demographic characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender, and class); it also is informed by our personal and professional experiences, our political and ideological stances, and other aspects of our social biography, or 'lifeworld.'" During our research in Angola, Cape Verde,

and Guinea-Bissau, we encountered a range of challenges related to our identities as researchers, how we are positioned in relation to those we study, how we remain accountable to those we engage with, and how we handle the information they share to ensure reciprocity. These questions have disrupted our methodological assumptions and led us to adopt a reflexive research praxis that critically engages with the complexities of positionality.

At this point, a clarification is necessary. This is the first article to come out of the aforementioned research project. Empirical findings per se shall be discussed in subsequent articles. This first essay focuses primarily on the politics of methodology in researching GBV in Africa, particularly as it relates to our own research practices.

The article is divided into three sections. We begin by conceptualising gendered messages in the context of GBV. In the second section, we delineate the conversational methodology as a feminist strategy to investigate GBV and the messages it conveys, discussing how issues of power emerge in the relationships between researchers and researched. In the last section, we provide a testimony of our own methodological practices with conversations in our research.

## Gender-Based Violence as a System of Communication

The bulk of the literature on GBV in feminist IR has critically disturbed the ontological, epistemological, and methodological fundaments of IR in its attempt "to understand existing gender relations – the dominance of masculinities over femininities – in order to transform how they work at all levels of global social, economic, and political life" (True 2017). This literature revolves around specific types of violence and their occurrence in conflicts, civil or transnational. Feminist scholars have privileged the study of physical violence, with sexual violence in particular gaining increased significance in both theoretical and empirical debates (DeLargy 2013; Sjoberg 2016b; True 2012). This has resulted in a proliferation of explanations of how gender inequalities and social cleavages (e.g., ethnicity), as well as social breakdown generate a spiral of acts of GBV.

Despite the illuminating findings of this body of research, the excessive focus on sexual violence not only diverts attention from other forms of violence (psychological, symbolic, discursive) (Medie 2019) but also tends to undermine an understanding of the structural and constitutive elements that produce violence in the first place. To be sure, violence is "both gendered and gendering" (Shepherd 2008, 51), which means that it is intertwined with gender and power (Silva 2021). It is also contextual, which means acts of violence are only made possible where violence entails different dimensions of social, economic, and political life. Understanding GBV thus requires examining the interplay of societal rules that position gendered individuals in sites of subordination and vulnerability (Davies and True 2015), while acknowledging that acts of violence do not happen in a vacuum, for they result from the interactions within a broader network of violences exercised by the state, economic and political systems, as well as colonialism (Gago 2020; Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021). More importantly, GBV constitutes a particular system of communication of subordination that reinforces the mandates of the same institutions and agents that produce it.

As a system of communication, GBV conveys messages about individuals' worthiness and value to society. Speaking of sexual violence in wartime, Sjoberg (2016a, 154–155, emphasis in original) claims that "[t]he gendered dehumanization of the direct victim, the gendered emasculation of the direct and proximate targets, and the gendered masculinization of the direct perpetrator and his/her allies all communicate *gendered messages.*" These messages encapsulate power relationships that are built upon notions of masculinity and femininity that translate into mandates of sexualisation, domination and subordination. Messages are inscribed on individuals' bodies, i.e., they are embodied practices of GBV (Sjoberg, 2016a). Nevertheless, Sjoberg's focus on sexual violence requires further scrutiny to advance a broader theoretical framework of GBV in feminist IR. To fill this theoretical gap, we look at Rita Segato's (2016) investigations on violence against women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where acts of violence operate within an intricate web of social meanings, and Charmaine Pereira's (2018) gender analysis of the Boko Haram insurgency and its spectacles of violence, which sheds light on the discontinuities and continuities of violence beyond the spectacles

themselves. These feminist scholars draw attention to the gendered strategies of communication, emphasising different aspects of the lexicon of violence.

According to Segato (2016), acts of GBV inscribe on targets' bodies messages about patriarchal dominance. Her experiences in Ciudad Juárez led her to interrogate the meanings of egregious acts of violence against women beyond the horror displays of disfigured bodies, mutilations, and femicides. Violence, according to Segato, is not subsumed under an act in isolation, but rather constitutes a system of communication of men's mandate over women's bodies and minds, where the latter represent another territorial frontier for the expansion of patriarchal power. The acts of GBV, therefore, are not simply a display of extreme and atrocious crimes: they consist of perpetrators' signatures on targets' bodies, inscribing on them messages that can be recognised by society at large and, more importantly, by other men. They constitute a lexicon that conveys certain interpretations about the world and how it is structured according to specific power relations that position certain individuals (namely men) at the top of social hierarchies while relegating other, gendered individuals to places of subordination and vulnerability (Lenine and Gonçalves 2021). These messages are part of a pedagogy of cruelty, which consists of "all acts and practices that teach, habituate, and programme individuals to transmute living beings and their vitality into things" (Segato 2019, 27). This pedagogy conveys patriarchal politics through physical, discursive, and symbolic acts of violence, which are not isolated but constitute the very system of messages that (re)produces violence against gendered individuals.

Analysing the Boko Haram insurgency in North East Nigeria, Pereira (2018) interrogates the spectacles of violence against women through a gender analysis. She focuses on how these spectacles shape perspectives on gender in this context, to see beyond the discontinuities entailed in the acts of violence to reveal the structures of gender as continuities that are frequently ignored due to the focus on the acts. More importantly, her analysis draws attention to relations of power and control over women's bodies that underlie the dynamics of violence, showing how hypermasculinity operates not only within Boko Haram, but also as a pervasive component of Nigerian society, economy, and politics. Moreover, Pereira argues that the focus on spectacles of violence renders the diverse categories of women less visible, selectively

subsuming them under the category of victim, which in turn "obscures understanding of the ways in which gendered relations and processes are embedded in complex social relations" (Pereira 2018, 259). Ultimately, the spectacles generate attention by overemphasising the acts of extreme violence perpetrated by Boko Haram while ignoring the normalisation of GBV in Nigerian society. The spectacle produces a simplistic narrative that suits audiences eager for sensationalism and voyeurism, while avoiding a thorough analysis of the deeper gendered messages entailed in the acts of violence and ingrained in the social fabric.

Both Segato and Pereira emphasise the structural dimension of GBV, whereby the acts of violence are manifestations of a deeply rooted system of discriminatory social norms around gender. These norms constitute the system of communication of the mandates of subordination that turn women and feminised subjects into targets of the various forms of GBV. It is precisely at this systemic level that the messages of GBV operate, and specific methodological strategies are required to decipher their meanings.

## Conversations and the Messages of GBV

Feminist methodologies have adopted the conversational approach to investigating women's lives in local and international contexts, as well as in their interconnections and grey zones (Sylvester 1994; Zurn 2021). Conversations are a useful tool for conducting research in sensitive settings, and GBV is a complex phenomenon characterised by latent traumas. Deciphering the messages of this system of communication requires delving into the meanings of violence to different social actors, a task which can only be achieved through the adoption of an interpretative methodology.

Conversations offer interesting methodological avenues to go beyond the limits of questionnaires where the researcher approaches the researched with previously elaborated questions, leaving little room for the interlocutor to set the rhythm of the interaction. Furthermore, researchers using questionnaires or structured interviews rarely interrogate their own positionalities in relation to the researched, rendering the underlying power relations invisible. Instead, central to these methodologies is how a researcher

interacts with her interviewed subject to "extract" reliable information, thus treating the latter as a "native informant" (Bunting and Quirk 2020) who will most likely be discarded once the research is completed (Van den Berg 2020, 41). To clarify what such extraction means, Bunting and Quirk (2020, 6) use the following metaphor: mining companies extract resources by digging deep into the ground and taking away the precious materials to be consumed elsewhere, most likely in the Global North.[1] Similarly, research-as-extraction drains precious knowledge in the form of personal testimonies, which is processed in distant places (Okech 2020, 320), to be consumed, often as entertainment, by foreign audiences disconnected from the daily challenges and suffering of those from whom the knowledge was taken. Consequently, personal testimonies are deprived of their meanings as part of the subject's life and become a "vehicle through which to gather documentary evidence of [women's] oppression" (Okech 2013, 96).

Conversations distinguish themselves from their mainstream counterparts by enabling continual reflection on the implications of one's methodological choices as well as the conceptual and ethical underpinnings of research, thus fostering the reflexive use of feminist methodologies (Ackerly et al. 2006). Conversations presume flexible relationships between researcher and researched, and this facilitates interactions between the parties involved in the process of knowledge production and further reflections upon their positionalities and the specific power relations such situatedness entails.

Regarding the researcher-researched relationship in researching GBV, adopting a conversational approach is useful in interacting with survivors of acts of violence. By starting conversations with a focus on the broader context of violence and letting the researched set the flow of the conversation, the researcher is more likely to bond with the interlocutor and exchange information in "a sense of give and take" which requires the mutual openness of both parties in the conversation (Mohlakoana 2008, 78; Mupotsa 2011, 102). Such relationships may be paramount to achieving research goals in cases where the research depends on individuals' will to share their stories or not, and the ways they perceive the researcher in terms of her positionalities is an essential factor in building trust, connecting, and cooperating (Fubara 2023; Kiconco 2020).[2]

Conversations are not a panacea for eliminating the hierarchies of power in the process of researching. Power relations manifest in differences of positionalities that may not be manageable in participants' relationships. For one thing, as researchers, we are situated in a structure of knowledge that determines who is entitled to define research questions, frame epistemological and methodological approaches, and ultimately decide what gets published and circulated within academia (see Sabea 2008). Moreover, academia fosters the notion that the researcher always knows more than the researched, thus imposing a hierarchical relationship whereby the former determines the proper meanings of social phenomena. As a result, interviewees may be abstracted from their situated knowledge, or, more profoundly, from their agency to define what counts as relevant issues to academia. Conversations may create channels of communication that minimise the effects of such power relations, but they cannot in themselves render researchers' relationships with interlocutors horizontal. Who is entitled to know, and how, still depends on researchers' conceptions about the world. Concepts, explanatory frameworks, and interpretations always involve social values, which are embedded in the researcher's background and practices (Mupotsa 2011). Our research is no different in this sense: although we do attempt to engage with individuals in ways that allow for their knowledge to be respected, we still approach them with certain goals derived from our research questions, theoretical frameworks, and even methodological approaches (see Merriam et al. 2001 and Okech 2020).

Confronted with these hierarchies of knowledge, the researched may resist notions that are insensitive to their local contexts, and which treat them as powerless objects instead of agents.[3] African feminists emphasise that "[p]ower (...) is negotiated and negotiable, assessed in relative rather than absolute terms, and rightfully framed within cultural, historical, and generational contexts" (Blay 2008, 69). In research about personal experiences of GBV, women may not be willing to share information when they are unsure of how researchers might use it (see Moputsa 2011).

It is in this terrain of uncertainty and instability that feminist methodologies (and, in our specific case, conversations) operate (Bennett 2008, 7). It is a place where we, as researchers, face our own fragilities as humans and scholars, as professionals trained within formal methodological

frameworks (often shaped by the qualitative–quantitative schism), and as individuals emotionally connected to those who are meant to be the researched. Like the methodological challenges Okech faced when talking to individuals about complex and sensitive issues, our own conversations reveal that listening involves "steer[ing] between multiple and contradictory assumptions" about who we are in the various social spaces we navigate. This has required reflecting on our own positioning vis-à-vis our interlocutors, and how these positionings are cemented upon multiple power relations that end up defining us as outsiders or insider–outsiders (Furaba 2023).

In our two-person team, Lenine is a complete foreigner to Africa, and a white man, which poses specific challenges in the context of feminist research, for he is perceived as an outsider. Being a Brazilian white man and the team member with the highest academic qualifications and a stable position in academia elicits ambivalent responses in Portuguese-speaking Africa. On the one hand, some individuals are still influenced by colonial legacies which grant a position of prestige to white people (especially men) and are therefore more willing to treat foreign researchers than local scholars. For our research, this means that certain doors that would otherwise be closed to local researchers, especially women researchers, who are still perceived as not belonging to this specific social site, are more likely to be open. On the other hand, his being an outsider can raise suspicions in the minds of interlocutors about Lenine's motivations for studying African realities. Is he simply engaging in data extraction to advance his own career elsewhere, without providing any feedback to the researched? Is he complicit in a process of sensationalism and voyeurism, given that GBV is often portrayed through acts of extreme violence without due consideration for the contextual features that make it possible? Will the research reproduce Western colonial academic perspectives and interests, even if both researcher and researched share a colonial past related to Portugal? Alternatively, does this point of connection open new avenues for our research team to reflect upon our own relations as individuals whose societies (Brazilian, Angolan, Cape Verdean, and Bissau-Guinean) are now attempting to strengthen bonds that are not (or at least should not be) mediated by colonialism? In interrogating his own positionality in a given context, Lenine continually tries to anticipate situations, identify the power relations at play and determine how he is

situated within these hierarchies. Such power relations are significant, not only because they are an integral part of the research endeavour at epistemological and methodological levels, but also because they reflect the gender hierarchies that structure society together with other social cleavages and colonialism. For Sanca, being a female researcher from Guinea-Bissau poses another set of challenges regarding positionalities, which have to do with insider–outsider status. Possessing local knowledge, and having connections with a wide network of activists, researchers, and civil society organisations (CSOs) in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau, are fundamental to achieving the research goals of this project. As a national engaged in feminist activism and research in Guinea-Bissau, Sanca is directly connected to individuals with diverse interpretations of the meanings of GBV. All these aspects contribute to her insider status, granting her a sense of "membership" within the collectivities we interact with. But this insider status does not always manifest in benign ways: for instance, her credentials as a researcher and an activist are often questioned by survivors, government and international organisation officials, and CSOs, who tend to see the research as not "serious" because it is conducted by a local, female researcher. Gender hierarchies are at play in the field, sometimes making it difficult to reach certain individuals, especially those in government and international organisations. Will they grant access to a female researcher? Do they view her as a person in a legitimate position to conduct the research? Furthermore, being a citizen of Guinea-Bissau poses challenges for her as an outsider when dealing with Cape Verdean citizens, especially survivors. Historical derogatory stereotypes about Bissau-Guinean nationals may surface in conversations and anticipating this causes personal distress. Will survivors speak openly to a Bissau-Guinean woman? Will they discriminate against Sanca based on nationalistic divisions? The outsider status also emerges in interactions with other ethnicities in Guinea-Bissau, as well as with individuals of different social classes and educational backgrounds. These are unsettling questions that are not easily negotiated in the course of research. They show how different social markers, such as seniority, ethnicity, nationalism, and social status (Yacob-Haliso 2019), interact in particular and not clearly demarcated ways for a female researcher in Africa (Fubara 2023).

As a research team, positionalities also feature in our relations with one another as researchers. Lenine and Sanca met in Brazil, where Lenine was Sanca's supervisor. We both conduct research for this project online and in loco, interviewing participants, sharing impressions, analysing testimonies, and discussing research findings. Our new status as partners in research has led to another set of reflections about positionalities: how to manage expectations concerning academic hierarchies and negotiate different knowledges about and experiences in Africa, to name a few. Managing these positionalities has already produced some results: regarding academic hierarchies, Sanca has taken the lead in interviews to firmly establish her status as a senior researcher, and we have decided to switch positions as first authors in publications derived from this project. In negotiating knowledge, we routinely share our impressions and understandings of all stages of the research process, eventually agreeing on what is to be reported in academic papers. As a team, we continually remind ourselves that our current status is not based on our previous interaction as supervisor-and-student, but as research partners who possess different types of knowledge, each essential for interpreting what we see, listen to, and feel in the research context.

Power relations are always multilayered and constantly shifting, which invites us to meditate on the possibilities of active reflexivity. This consists of "ongoing interrogations of (1) our positionality; (2) how our positionality is read by others, given their own social location and the contexts in which we interact; and (3) the assumptions about our conclusions in the first two stages" (Soedirgo and Glas 2020, 527). Embracing and acknowledging our positionalities instead of rendering them invisible is paramount to managing the power relations in the research process. We continually remind ourselves that positionalities are dynamic, context-dependent, and contingent; hence, they cannot be treated as static, but as changing features in our understanding of our selves.

## Conversations in Practice

In this final section, we describe in more detail the preliminary conversations carried out with feminist activists, CSOs, scholars engaged with research on GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau, and a survivor. Activists,

scholars, CSOs, and survivors have different perspectives on the meanings of GBV, and engaging in conversations with them was our methodological strategy. We proceeded with due respect and extreme caution, for example, by avoiding direct questions about cases of violence and we did not press them to describe experiences of violence in their respective countries, considering the multiple dangers involved in this sensitive issue as well as the intricacies of how individuals recognise (or fail to recognise) abuse (see Bennett 2001).

The first stage of our research consisted in preparing for the field by reading about the local histories of GBV (Silva 2021, 2022); analysing reports issued by United Nations agencies, NGOs and national ministries; and reviewing local research on GBV and feminisms in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau (Figueiredo and Gomes 2016; Liberato 2016; Monteiro 2016; Mouzinho and Cutaia 2017; Silva 2021).[4] Preliminary conversations[5] with scholars, activists, and a survivor provided a more experience-based impression of the field. The conversations touched on multiple aspects of gender issues and GBV in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. These include gender-mainstreaming in law and its effects in defining violence against women and/or GBV; the operations of UN agencies and CSOs in providing support and relief for survivors, and in generating and collecting data on GBV; feminist activisms and how feminists in each country understand GBV and make its eradication a goal in their social activism; and the lived experiences of survivors, how to reach them, and the complex web of relationships in which they are immersed.

At the start of our conversations, we would provide a brief introduction of ourselves, such as our nationalities, our academic credentials, and the research project. We would then ask our interlocutor about the context of GBV in the interviewee's country; how women become targets of acts of violence; or the various understandings and meanings of GBV in her society. Our goal with these questions was to understand the field beyond raw data displayed in official reports and research. Our approach was to let interviewees express themselves freely, and to shift positions from us, the researchers, to them (Schulz 2020), enabling them to set the rhythm of the conversations. In so doing, we attempted to make our interlocutors feel comfortable in sharing their ideas, impressions, and experiences, without being judgmental about their content, nor strictly procedural. This meant that

we were listening and responding to their speech, knowledge and lived experiences. It was our way of avoiding the possibility of treating testimonies as mere data that one extracts from a subject in a reifying fashion.

We eschewed asking direct questions about acts of violence for various reasons. First, we did not know whether the interviewee was herself a survivor of some form of GBV (which was the case in one of our conversations). Second, direct questions might strike the interviewee in unanticipated, counterproductive ways, which could undermine mutual trust, a process that is still under construction and continual negotiation. Third, a direct question could evoke prejudices about Africa associated with exoticism and sensationalism, which are frequently infected by racism and colonialism (see Tamale 2011). Finally, violence is deeply contextual, and acts of violence are manifestations of the more complex structure of violence in society.

The interviewees also provided invaluable information about research procedures in their home countries and the challenges we might face in the field. One obstacle, in particular, has been emphasised by all of them: governments. In Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, data are rarely publicised on easily accessible platforms and accessing them through governmental institutions requires navigating bureaucracies with the help of insiders or people who have connections with bureaucrats. In Cape Verde, governmental agencies are more transparent and make data available. However, it remains necessary to navigate bureaucracies to find data, as not all information is minimally or readily available. It is also important to note that CSOs and activists frequently cooperate with local governments to implement feminist agendas. However, government authorities are also suspicious of them and, in the case of Angola, authorities attempt to control dissent and critical voices (Mouzinho and Cutaia 2017).

Another challenge mentioned by some interviewees concerned previous research conducted by foreigners, namely the problem of data extraction. In our conversations with an Angolan activist (a founding member of *Ondjango Feminista*), the extractivist model of research was mentioned as an obstacle. She stated: "Many foreign researchers interview CSO members, but do not provide feedback about the research, so many CSOs now refuse to share information." Some organisations, bureaucrats, and other agents are

suspicious of the neocolonial dynamics implicated in this sort of inquiry (see Gellman 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2021). To overcome this suspicion, which reflects the wider perception of extractivism in Angola, the activist suggested building a more meaningful connection with agents in the field and making room for them in the research by discussing methodological issues described by Gellman (2022) as "collaborative methodology," which seeks to decolonise research.

At the end of our conversations, we would ask whether the interviewee could kindly identify and encourage other women (activists, scholars, survivors, authorities) to participate in our research. Aware of the ethical implications of outsourcing recruitment (Kiconco 2020), we opted instead to rely on their cooperation to reach such women and ask whether they would agree to share their knowledge. We emphasised our commitment to ethical research standards and, more importantly, to paying attention to the complexities of layered realities, honouring women's experiences and respecting their multiple trajectories within the ambit of GBV.[6]

These complexities permeate all aspects of our research and conversational approach. Not only was each national context complex, but also different layers of context coexist in these societies, and each layer displays specific intricacies that are not easily subsumed under oversimplifying, generalist labels such as patriarchy or subordination. To be sure, these labels capture general patterns and trends, but they are not sufficient for comprehending the realities of survivors, nor the experiences of those struggling to advance feminist agendas on violence, gender, and power at all levels and spheres of politics. Complexity emanates from the intersections of gender-religion-ethnicity-class; the contradictory relationships between survivors and those who provide them with support in shelters and CSOs; and the negotiations with individuals for whom GBV is a daily war in their lives and communities. It was precisely in the testimony of an activist who survived GBV that we were confronted with the most difficult challenge in the entire research process, namely, how to understand complexity, embrace it, and at the same time, honour those who share their personal struggles with us.

In the testimony in question, our interlocutor shared a deeply intimate story that connects to the broader context of structural violence in Guinea-Bissau. As she declared: "Sometimes I say that I am the child of an act of violence: a forced marriage." She had survived continued acts of physical, psychological, and economic violence, which were manifestations of the intricate web of relationships between gender, ethnicity, and religion, which together operate to turn women into mere objects belonging to their male partners, husbands, and families. Her body was turned by her family into a site for the extraction of her labour, and, more fundamentally, her existential force, undermining in this process, her autonomy. Religion intersected with gender and ethnicity to legitimise the various forms of exploitation exercised by her family during her life. Breaking this cycle of violence was a process of regaining agency and asserting herself as an individual among those who had treated her as an object.

Through her testimony, we identified the patterns of signification of gendered messages. It was precisely in this story of resistance against different acts of violence that we could understand not only how some forms of violence are neglected in international debates about GBV (e.g., the economic extraction entailed in economic violence, which denies women rights to inheritance, property, and financial management in the family), but also, and more importantly for our research, the powerful message of annihilation of the self. The denial of autonomy and agency confines women to a role of serfdom in relation to husbands, brothers, and families, and this message is conveyed by and constantly re-enacted in the stories of other survivors who had faced similar experiences of GBV. The message has become entrenched in the social fabric, normalising the pedagogy of cruelty as part of the broader structure of violence.

By holding these conversations and listening to personal stories, on many occasions we felt that storytelling was a way of avoiding the erasure of one's history, a form of resistance against GBV that cuts across different psychological and social levels, and a process of sharing knowledge about how to strategise in struggles against GBV. By viewing the structural persistence of GBV beyond the spectacles of specific acts of violence, we, researchers and researched, could find paths of resistance, empowerment, and change that are necessary in this long struggle.

## Conclusion

Declarations of positionality may evoke narcissistic performances that reinforce colonial tropes, especially those associated with racial divides (Gani and Khan 2024). As challenging as such declarations are, reflecting on the power relations operating within our team and vis-à-vis interlocutors in Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau offered us an opportunity to anticipate power inequities and negotiate them with all the subjects involved in the research. More importantly, considering concerns raised in IR about the essentialism of positionality statements, our primary focus on relations instead of personal identities enabled us to raise legitimate questions that may or may not be answered in our field research, but which are essential to disturbing the discipline and the mainstream discourse on scientific objectivity (see Tickner 2005). Questions, rather than definitive answers, function as reminders that the aims of research and disciplines must be constantly interrogated to confront old prejudices (Gune and Manuel 2011, 40–1).

Furthermore, this reflexive stance helps re-signify the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of GBV research in IR, especially in contexts where imaginaries of sexual violence still dominate discussions. Although Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa have also endured traumatic civil wars, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau contemporarily face challenges associated with less spectacular forms of violence than those observed in conflict settings. Understanding how the structures of GBV operate in these countries is fundamental to advancing change at the local and international levels. After all, what happens to women in these contexts cannot be separated from the international politics of GBV, which prioritises certain spectacular acts of violence. To change this outlook, more research grounded in the realities of individuals in the field is ever more necessary.

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## Notes

1. The Global North also influences how research is conducted in Africa by African researchers. Since most funding originates from international organisations headquartered in North America and Europe, African researchers, governments and NGOs are constrained by the methodological requirements set by these organisations (Bunting and Quirk 2020). African researchers face the challenge of accommodating, on the one hand, foreign interests and "scientific" standards, and on the other, their own interests and goals with respect to producing knowledge that dialogues with local realities and communities. In our conversations with Cape Verdean scholars and Bissau–Guinean activists, this concern was also expressed and perceived as detrimental to the valuation of autochthonous knowledges of African societies.
2. Reddy and Sandfort (2008) emphasise the importance of building relationships with research participants to make them feel like active contributors to the research process. This minimises suspicions, facilitates cooperation, and helps to understand how individuals negotiate their multiple identities while navigating a complex social context pervaded with gendered hierarchies. Kiconco (2020) makes similar remarks about the importance of trust between participants and the researcher, and she also emphasises how her positionalities as a black African woman facilitated access to survivors of GBV. Likewise, bonding allowed Kiconco to rely on the collaboration of survivors to identify and recruit other women to her study.

3. One of our interlocutors in Angola underscored how individuals who had previously participated in international research avoid collaborating with foreign scholars, because of such disempowering treatment that renders them research objects rather than agents of their own lives and within their local realities.
4. A great deal of this literature focuses on feminist activisms and historical struggles in the processes of independence from Portugal. It sheds light on how women were present in a variety of social processes leading to independence, and how their current social positions reflect gender and (neo)colonial hierarchies.
5. Online conversations via Google Meet. Sessions lasted between 40 and 50 minutes on average. Conversations were conducted in Portuguese, and the excerpts presented in this paper were translated by the authors.
6. Gune and Manuel (2011) advocate for an ethics of care whenever an "ethically sanitised" methodology fails to address the nuances of doing field research. Finding ways to protect subject-participants and the researchers themselves is essential to researching sensitive issues, such as sexuality, violence, and GBV. In our experiences, we were constantly reminding ourselves of the need for an ethics of care that could minimise the power inequities between us and subject-participants, as well as within our team.

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# Violence Against Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe

**Blessing Hodzi and Yvonne Phiri**

## Introduction

In patriarchal societies, where inequalities between men and women prevail, women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to gendered violence. While gendered violence affects all women, research indicates that women with disabilities face a heightened risk (United Nations General Assembly 4/67/227, 4). Globally, UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) reports that 60% to 80% of women with disabilities have experienced sexual violence, with 50% subjected to multiple assaults (2015, 149). This does not mean that men with disabilities are not affected by gendered violence, but women are disproportionately affected. It has been noted that approximately 80% of these women are in developing countries, indicating the need for studies on violence against women with disabilities in Africa (World Health Organization 2011, 8).

In Zimbabwe, disability is estimated at 9% of the population, with a higher prevalence among females (9,4%) than males (8,5%) (ZIMSTAT 2017, xii). Despite this prevalence, the existing literature often overlooks the distinct experiences of women and girls with disabilities and portrays women as a homogeneous group. This approach, as bell hooks (1999) describes it in her exploration of the commodification of Otherness, amounts to "eating the Other," that is, appropriating marginalised women's experiences and treating "women" as a universal category. Women with disabilities confront a complex array of challenges driven by societal misconceptions and systemic neglect of their needs, and marked by violence, discrimination and marginalisation. Therefore, there is a pressing need for research that explores the unique experiences of women and girls with disabilities, moving beyond universalising

women's experiences and acknowledging the diversity within the female population.

## Understanding Disability Within the Context of Zimbabwe

The Disabled Persons Act, Chapter 17:01 of 1992, in Zimbabwe predates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, adopted in 2006), but shares a similar understanding of disability as involving physical, mental, or sensory impairments that result in barriers to full participation in society. The Constitution of Zimbabwe also protects the rights of persons with disabilities. However, there is entrenched discrimination against people with disabilities which is influenced by cultural, societal and religious understandings of disability in Zimbabwe.

Our perspective on disability is rooted in the critical model of disability (Hosking 2008, 4). This model views disability as emanating from **social barriers** that prevent people with impairments from participating fully in society, and it aims to challenge societal expectations of "normalcy" which generate such exclusion. This viewpoint, however, is not universally shared in Zimbabwe, where deep-seated ableist beliefs often give rise to perceptions of disability as a deficit rather than a part of human diversity.

Such misconceptions are influenced by cultural, religious and linguistic factors, and compounded by patriarchal norms that dictate women's roles in society. Culture, as defined by Mupotsa (2011, 95), encompasses a system of beliefs, values, norms, behaviours and practices that shape interactions and understanding within communities. In Zimbabwe, such beliefs often portray disability as a curse or punishment wrought by ancestral displeasure or witchcraft (Mugumbate and Mtetwa 2014, 150). The perception of disability as a curse can drive caregivers to hide children or to conform to societal expectations of "normalcy," thereby perpetuating discrimination and demonstrating a reluctance to acknowledge disability as a natural aspect of human diversity. However, within the Tonga community in Zimbabwe, disability is often perceived as a divine act to be accepted rather than stigmatised. This perspective is encapsulated in the proverb *"Kocilema kunywigwa maanzi"* ("It is better to be disabled than dead") (Eide and Ingstad 2011, 175). Although this proverb may appear to reinforce a hierarchical

valuation of bodies, it reveals that the society values life regardless of physical or cognitive differences. This worldview is shared across the country and influences how people interpret disabilities.

These more generous attitudes notwithstanding, patriarchal norms deeply embedded in both religious and cultural narratives place women with disabilities at a disadvantage regarding social status. Selective interpretations of religious texts, such as the portrayal of Eve as subordinate to Adam in Genesis, are used to justify unequal treatment and reinforce male dominance. Mukushi et al. (2019, 104) point out that disability in the Bible, particularly in the book of Exodus, is attributed to the sins of parents, and Leviticus 21:16–23 discriminates against people with disabilities. This, coupled with cultural norms emphasising female obedience and domesticity, creates a situation where women with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged. They are seen as both disabled and less than (able-bodied) women, rendering them vulnerable to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Such abuse is often perpetrated within their own families and communities.

Language is another crucial element of culture which plays an important role in how a society understands disability. Within local languages, individuals with disabilities are often described in disrespectful or derogatory terms, perpetuating societal biases. Peters (2000) highlights language as a key component of culture, emphasising that descriptive terms used in many local languages contribute to negative social attitudes and understandings of disability. Shona and Ndebele, for instance, use terms such as *chirema* and *isilima* (a person with disability) and *murungu-dunhu*/*Musope* and *inkawu* (a local white person) to refer to individuals with albinism. These terms have derogatory nuances, pointing to negative perceptions that are attached to disability. These social, linguistic, cultural, and religious beliefs reflect social dynamics and power structures, serving as mechanisms for justifying and perpetuating violence and oppression, even where such beliefs can also act as sources of support and resilience.

## Violence Against Women with Disabilities

According to the United Nations (1993, 2), violence against women is defined as any act of gender-based violence resulting in physical, sexual, or mental harm. The global challenge of violence against women and girls with disabilities is evident in various regions, including Africa. Reports of 80,7% in Rwanda, 87,1% in South Africa, 54,3% in Ghana, 64% in Uganda, and 57,1% in Zimbabwe point to alarmingly high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional violence against this sector of the population (Chirwa et al. 2020; Valentine et al. 2019; Comprehensive Situational Analysis of PWD in Zimbabwe, 2021). Women with disabilities face multiple forms of violence, including physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, along with institutional mistreatment (Frohmader, Dowse and Didi 2015, 13). These forms of violence are entrenched in systems of domination and inequalities that exist in various contexts. Violence adversely affects the physical and mental well-being of women and girls with disabilities, exacerbating their disability status and increasing health risks, such as HIV infection and unplanned or unwanted pregnancy (Peta 2017; Valentine et al. 2019; van der Heijden et al. 2019).

Disability significantly heightens the vulnerability of women and girls to violence, particularly considering challenges such as limited mobility, communication barriers, and difficulty in identifying perpetrators. Women and girls with disabilities often confront gender and power imbalances, leading to their marginalisation and the normalisation of abuse against them. Research by Scolese et al. (2020, 989) indicates that women with severe disabilities are more susceptible to violence compared to those with mild disabilities. The nature of their disabilities often impedes their ability to escape or report incidents of violence. In addition, societal norms that maintain a culture of secrecy around violent cases, particularly within the home, may induce silence from victims to protect their families and avoid potential backlash from those on whom they depend. Perpetrators often exploit these vulnerabilities, as the abuse often goes unreported by the victim. Moreover, there is a concerning assumption that husbands, male relatives, neighbours and caregivers abuse women and girls with disabilities under their care with impunity. This impunity not only renders violence against women and girls with disabilities invisible but sustains and legitimises the abuse. Furthermore, the belief that women and girls with disabilities are asexual poses significant barriers to reporting sexual violence.

This misconception undermines the credibility of survivors when they report abuse.

A poignant illustration of these challenges is the case of Rutendo, Joshua, and Freddy in a traditional court setting in Manicaland (SlyMedia TV, 5 April 2023, YouTube). Rutendo, who had an intellectual disability, and her husband, who had a physical disability, were exploited by Joshua and Freddy. Joshua used seductive video material to manipulate Rutendo, while Freddy exchanged necessities (onions and tomatoes) for sexual favours. Despite Rutendo's account of exploitation, the traditional court participants (men and women present for the hearing including relatives and villagers), influenced by societal attitudes, blamed Rutendo for what they perceived as a lack of moral character and recommended divorce. This response mirrors broader societal perceptions that often place the blame on the character of the woman rather than holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. Furthermore, Rutendo's ordeal underscores the difficulty faced by women and girls with disabilities in seeking justice. When confronted with allegations, perpetrators commonly deny their actions, pitting the word of the survivor against that of the perpetrator. Freddy and Joshua denied that they took advantage of Rutendo's disability; instead, they said they had an agreement with her. The patriarchal belief that blames women for sexual exploitation makes it challenging for survivors to be heard and believed, fostering a culture of silence around abuse. In essence, interconnected factors such as gender, disability and culture indicate that cultural and religious beliefs in Zimbabwe are not merely background features in the perpetuation of violence against women with disabilities. In fact, they actively shape a social landscape where discrimination, exclusion and harmful power dynamics thrive, creating fertile ground for abuse to flourish.

## Amplifying the Voices of Women with Disabilities through Research

The critical disability theory urges us to fight against all forms of exclusion and advocate for inclusion. To do this, we draw from Clenora Hudson-Weems' Africana womanisms (1993), which emerged as a response to the inadequacy of white mainstream feminism and even black feminism to fully address the specific historical, cultural, and social realities of women of African descent.

Hudson-Weems (1993, 17–30) developed the framework of Africana womanism, highlighting key elements such as self-naming, family centrality, genuine sisterhood, and positive male–female relationships. While Hudson-Weems' theory is designed to encompass all women of African descent in the diaspora, we argue for its relevance and applicability to African women on the continent, specifically in Zimbabwe. This narrowed application is justified by the theory's foundational grounding in African cultural values such as communalism, family-centeredness, and spiritual resilience, which remain deeply embedded in many Zimbabwean societies and are relevant to understanding the lived realities of African women with disabilities here. Her conceptualisation emphasises the agency of women of African descent in defining and interpreting their experiences. Drawing from Africana womanist principles, we **advance the standpoint** that current mainstream feminist discourses in Zimbabwe have, to a significant extent, sidelined the unique and intersectional experiences of women and girls with disabilities within the broader discourse of combating violence against women.

FEMNET (2017, 4) observed, however, that women's voices are often sidelined, and their bodies are seen as passive recipients of externally imposed policy solutions, particularly affecting young women. This observation resonates with the experiences of women and girls with disabilities in Africa, whose narratives are frequently framed through Western perspectives and solutions that may not align with African societal contexts and infrastructure limitations. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, 11) questions the absence of African women's voices: "Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the *sites* and forms in which these voices are uttered?" We wonder whether the voices of women with disabilities have been excluded from the discourse because their experiences have been overlooked, or because they have been inadvertently silenced, echoing hooks' (1999) notion of "eating the Other."

To address these systemic injustices, there is an urgent need to amplify the voices of women and girls with disabilities and advocate for their rights. This entails conducting research to explore their experiences, shedding light on the unique challenges they face, and dismantling structures that perpetuate a culture of silence and impunity. Studies about women and girls with disabilities should demonstrate sensitivity regarding the diverse array of

experiences within this demographic. It is imperative that such studies be accompanied by feminist reflexivity to bridge the researcher–participant gap and to address biases and ethical considerations in research (Motsepo 2011, 96). Additionally, researchers must navigate the inherent power dynamics of outsider/insider interactions, ensuring that the voices of women with disabilities are authentically heard and respected.

The discourse on violence against women must acknowledge the unique challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities. Doing so requires not only research but also a cultural shift towards recognising the inherent dignity of every individual, regardless of disability or gender. This approach would foster solidarity among feminists, enabling them to amplify the voices of women with disabilities. Such an endeavour would align with our objective in examining violence against women with disabilities in Zimbabwe and contribute to the broader pursuit of liberty for all African people.

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# Researching Christian-Related Violence Against Women/Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana: Insider/Outsider Positionalities

**Eugenia A. B. Anderson**[1]

## Introduction

For many years, I have worked simultaneously as a gender historian in the Department of History and Political Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and as an active participant and lay leader in a Christian faith-based community. Both the church and the university have shaped my thinking and my commitment to engaging theoretically and practically with some of the challenges women face, especially in their own homes. Constantly on my mind is the sense that violence against women/intimate partner violence (VAW/IPV) is prevalent in Africa due to cultural and religious norms that firmly establish the authority of men over women as husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and brothers-in-law, while also frowning on divorce. The hierarchical relationship between women and men, the stereotyped socialisation of boys and girls, and varying levels of discrimination are not merely societal but also religious constructs. I would argue that this emphasis on a hierarchical family structure, together with biblical texts on female submission, contributes to providing a theological basis for women's subordination and gender inequality. This, in addition to the cultural practice of payment of the bridewealth (*tiri nsa* among the Akan), weakens women's ability to leave toxic marriages or relationships.

I undertook a study with members of Christian faith communities (not my own) to begin to understand how conflicts arising from husbands' assaults on their wives are addressed within church communities. Historically, these communities have sought to manage domestic struggles through counselling structures set up by the church. Seeking resolution for IPV beyond the church community is frowned upon, and this places wives in difficult positions. It also

places huge responsibilities upon church leaders who may be unable to appease both parties and bring peace. Churches tend to prioritise harmony and social cohesion through mediation techniques, which are generally disfavourable to women's true emancipation from violence arising from misinterpretation of theological subordination.

Generally, feminist theologians interpret Christianity as an androcentric and patriarchal religion. There are varied, often complex feminist views on the implications of biblical texts for the suppression of, and violence against, women. Western feminist theologians including Mary Daly, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, and Rosemary Radford Ruether question the patriarchal nature of Christianity through the reconstruction of God as male (the use of androcentric language), the narrative that Jesus Christ appeared in a male form, and the maleness of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) (Ruether, 1983; Daly, 1985; Moder, 2019). Johnson (2002) notes that the sexist outlook of the Bible is foundational to the male-God/male-man superiority complex. Further, Western feminist theologians problematise the traditional formulation of atonement/redemption based on the male God as the divine, yet violent father who requires violence to facilitate forgiveness (Moder, 2019; Makhanya, 2022). African feminist theologians, however, highlight how Christianity was used as a tool to suppress Indigenous people. They advocate for liberatory theology, which would ensure women's emancipation through a reinterpretation of the Bible (Oduyoye, 1995, 2017; Mtetwa, 1998). Thistlethwaite (1981) calls for a "new hermeneutic" that challenges women's oppression. Believing that "abused women are the victims of an unjust power distribution in society" that is "contrary to the will of God," she observes that hermeneutic scrutiny of biblical texts could reveal structural inequalities that facilitate mistreatment (Thistlethwaite, 1981: 310–313). Oduyoye established the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to address gender inequalities in the church. In interrogating the church and colonial histories, Oduyoye advocates a detachment of African women's experiences from those of Western women by using the Bible to re-establish the proper relationship between men and women (Oduyoye, 1995, 2001, 2017). This relationship includes women's independence in marriage instead of the patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women in homes and churches (Oduyoye, 2017). Oduyoye

(1995, 2017) uses her own life as an example of how independence in marriage can be a source of transformation of gender inequalities in the church and society. Therefore, these feminists essentially offer an emancipatory reading of biblical theology and seek the empowerment of women through the reinterpretation of biblical texts.

With this background, and drawing from my observations, I interviewed people who could be categorised into two groups: faith-based survivors of IPV and religious leaders from three different churches – Methodist, Anglican, and Assemblies of God. I also held focus groups with people in women's leadership and marriage support within the churches. My connections with the faith-based communities made it possible to engage in these conversations. Integrating this kind of research into the experiences of VAW/IPV within relatively closed communities (such as churches) is vital, given the uptake of Christianity by many women. Negotiating these challenges, I argue, takes patience and a willingness to take certain risks. These risks include raising difficult questions with people who may influence one's life and being entrusted with stories that are confidential within a close-knit community.

There are multi-layered positionalities researchers assume based on their relationship with the study population: as participants, participant observers, external participants, and nonparticipating observers. The position of the researcher on IPV raises important questions about methodological tools and ethical considerations, in addition to those posed by any research. The researcher's self-positioning as an insider and/or outsider can be a complex process with interrelated (sometimes contradictory) statuses. The boundary between the insider, who is known to share the faith of the interlocutor, and the outsider, who is asking to hear experiences and perspectives, is porous due to the participants' different identities. For a woman researcher, the negotiation of rapport, assumed knowledges, and orientation to the topic adopted for a discussion with a priest, a man with authority, would differ from what pertains in a confidential conversation with another woman about her experience of abuse.

I categorise my position as an insider/outsider based on the similarities and differences between the respondents and me. Fundamentally, we have the same gender (woman) and religious belief (Christian). When women interview

other women, they tend to enjoy a greater harmonious relationship because of shared experiences of being in a subordinate position due to their gender. Additionally, women may enjoy better rapport based on affinities across other social categories such as class, age, and ethnicity. The hierarchical relations between men and women in society and in the church provided further common ground of lived experiences as Christian women that facilitated my conversations with the survivors. However, gender is not the only basis for the subordination of all women; other socio-demographic characteristics complicate this shared relationship. Women high-earners are more likely to enjoy greater independence and respect from male members of society than women with lower earnings. I was also an outsider because I did not share their traumatic experience of domestic violence. Although I identified with their experiences of cultural and religious subordination, I did not experience the verbal, economic, and physical abuse they suffered from their intimate partners. Situational and occupational identities also differed: the participants included pastors, a petty trader, a secretary, and a kitchen aide, while I am a university lecturer. This influenced the deference with which the participants treated me and may have hindered an extremely cordial relationship expected from a woman-to-woman interview. The outsider perspective also reveals itself in our different ethnicities and cultures. Whereas I am a Fante, the participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds: Ewe, Ga-Adangbe, Fanti, and Asante. Though I used an interpreter, in some instances these differences created a sense of powerlessness for me because I could not adequately communicate in the different languages. Therefore, my power as a researcher was diminished by these perceived differentials.

As an insider, I had greater and easier access to the respondents than an outsider researcher would. My position as a Christian gave me easy access to the church leaders interviewed. My knowledge of the research setting provided a platform for breaking the initial barrier of unfamiliarity. Further, knowing the nuances of the Christian language enabled me to ask sensitive yet critical questions. There is the potential reduction of cultural shock due to similar backgrounds in the interpretation of biblical texts. Being a church leader, *asafomaame* (pastor's wife), meant it was easier to broach sensitive subjects on the interpretation of Christian texts that facilitate violence against women. I was therefore not surprised to hear participants state that God is masculine because

of the constant references to God as "Father" or "He" in biblical texts, and that Jesus Christ, who is God, came in the form of a man, not a woman. Further, in some instances, there were disagreements between the respondents and me. Most of the pastors interviewed stated clearly that they did not perceive the Bible's injunctions regarding men's authority over women as sexist, and some of the participants in the focus groups, including women, agreed with this. As a researcher accustomed to this reading, I was not surprised or taken aback by the perspective. It is part of a discourse that restricts women and justifies their subordination, and it points to wives' reluctance to speak openly about abuse from their husbands.

The power dynamics between the researcher and the participants take different forms in the negotiated research process. As a PhD holder, my educational background earned me deference, and older reverend ministers and women's groups willingly listened to my opinion. A participant referred to me as "*me doctor*" (my learned PhD holder) as an indication of his respect for me. While these identities provided me with easy access, it is possible that the deference also hindered further cordiality and prevented the participants from fully expressing their opinions. As a young woman, my age and gender placed me in a less powerful position, dissonant with my social status. Two of the interviewed pastors repeatedly referred to me as "*me ba*" and "*m'akyerɛ ba*" (my daughter in Twi and Fante, respectively) to draw attention to their age, and by extension, to indicate the wisdom in their arguments. In interpreting the micropolitics of a researcher's relationships with respondents, power or powerlessness is determined by the latter's willingness to offer information. All the pastors interviewed were unwilling to provide information about the identities of women who had previously been abused (thus adhering to the pastoral ethical code). They willingly provided an overview of the women's experiences, but not avenues for interviewing them. I, therefore, had to search for such women through the Ark Foundation.[2] While being a church leader gave me some power because it made people feel safe to talk to me, it also, paradoxically, reduced my power, as the tendency towards deference to authority made it difficult for participants, especially women, to speak freely.

My perspectives on gender and religion also posed a challenge to any notion of my neutrality concerning participants. Just as feminists argue that Christianity is a man's religion and the Bible is sexist, many Christian leaders are uncomfortable with the concept of feminism. Ghanaians have diverse perceptions of feminists, and women who ardently advocate the cause of women are usually presumed to be feminists. In Christian circles, feminists are seen to be opposed to the Christian order of creation. It was, therefore, difficult for me to identify as a feminist/gender scholar in the interviews with the pastors for fear of alienating them. I had to be subtle in broaching the subjects of feminism and equality while interviewing the Christian leaders, as well as in the focus groups.

When I began this research, I had the knowledge that Christian survivors of IPV are encouraged to find support and assistance within their church communities. While this may seem appropriate given that support for survivors always needs to be rooted in their context, the fact that biblical frameworks sanction men's authority over their wives means that such church community assistance can potentially deepen the survivor's dilemma about her marriage and her pain. More knowledge about this situation is critical, and this standpoint provides a vivid reflection of the positional complexities of my work. There is little feminist methodological reflection on how to work in ways that respect and simultaneously question the practices of church communities. There is also a great deal of wariness, both from faith-based survivors about sharing their experiences and from church authorities who do not welcome "outside" questioning about their practices. Nonetheless, entering this space, especially as a Christian, is important for understanding IPV, and this standpoint offers a way of thinking about the possibilities of ongoing research in this area. The researcher's and participants' cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and experiences are important dimensions of researching Christian-related VAW/IPV. By reflecting on the complexities of my positionalities as an insider/outsider, I argue that the power dynamics between researcher and researched are constantly negotiated, depending on shared identity with the study population.

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## Notes

1. Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.
2. Ark Foundation is a Christian non-governmental organisation that provides care and social action in the form of a safe shelter space, psychological counselling, medical support, legal assistance and resettlement support for survivors of gender-based violence. https://www.arkfoundationghana.org/cms/ Accessed 27 May 2023.

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# "We Are Not Just Data Sources!" The Pursuit of Epistemic Justice

**Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu speaks with Katleho Mahlobo and Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose from Newcastle Prideful Legends, and Katlego Chibamba from the Positive Vibes Trust. What follows is a compilation of two discussions, held in English and isiZulu. Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu's English translations from isiZulu appear in brackets.**

My conversations with Jabulisile, Katleho and Katlego about the experiences of grassroots LGBTI+ activism and knowledge creation are heartfelt and eye-opening. We trace the intimacies between activism and methodologies used to create knowledge at the grassroots community level. The decolonial-queer theoretical standpoint requires interrogating and challenging normative assumptions, questioning stable categorisations and subverting hierarchies rooted in colonial cis-heteropatriarchal influences (Pereira 2019; Detamore 2016). Through these conversations, we queer and decolonise dominant epistemologies while reflecting on the unique ways queer knowledge is created in the global South. We explore the emancipatory potential of storytelling, uncovering resilience, trauma, queer joy and the complexities of the mundane. This engagement becomes a vantage point for exploring epistemic violence, examining the intimacies of queering imagined separations between "communities" and "researchers" and interrogating how the unequal power dynamics between funders and recipient organisations influence knowledge creation. As a testament to Nnaemeka's (2004) theorising of African-centred social change activism through negotiations and no ego, we also shed light on the nuances of advocacy for gender and sexually diverse individuals in contexts of traditional leadership, funding disparities, the criminalisation of same-sex relationships and unfavourable political climates.

**Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu (MZZ):** Thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation with me. Let me tell you briefly about myself: I am a social scientist and a scholar-activist. I am pursuing an interdisciplinary master of social sciences at the University of Cape Town, specialising in psychology and African feminist studies. My research focuses mainly on the nexus of gender, sexuality, sex, *isintu* or, more broadly, "African cultures" and violence. Can you tell me a little about yourself and the work that you do?

**Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose (JJM):** My name is Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose. I am a dedicated human rights activist and the director of an organisation called Newcastle Prideful Legends – NNPL for short. As an activist, I am committed to advocating for justice, equality and dignity for all people. My journey into this work began with a deep sense of empathy and a refusal to accept injustice *nje* (just because), as a norm, as other people do. For the LGBTI+ community, injustice is a norm – as if being homophobic is normal. I decided to challenge these norms through grassroots organising and direct action. I strive to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced so that I can push for meaningful change.

**Katleho Mahlobo (KM):** uKatleho Mahlobo is my name. I'm a proud transman dedicated to advocating in the social justice space. How I became a human rights activist was influenced by how I came to understand myself. It wasn't an easy journey, and it took being able to access knowledge, education and programmes such as workshops and dialogues that taught our community about the lived experiences of the LGBTI+. Then I entered spaces that try to create a world where we all can live equally without discrimination or hate simply because of who we are and who we are attracted to. I felt a strong sense of purpose and when I joined Newcastle Prideful Legends in 2020 – having been recruited by uJessie – was a great opportunity to bring about the change that I wish to see. We're not doing this work only for us and the people living in the now. It's also for our children that are growing up in this world. *Esibakhulisayo kungabi yinto yokuthi bakhula kulezwe esakhula kulo thina sakhula kunenzondo, kunabantu abangakuthandi kunabantu* (the children we are raising shouldn't grow up in the world we grew up in, full of hatred, bigots and others) who make you feel unsafe and unsupported. I think *enye into eyangifaka kukhulu futhi ekuthini ngibe ne* (another thing that drove me towards and gave me) drive to advocate for LGBTI+ people is that

there are misconceptions and misinformation about them. Such inaccurate information perpetuates problems at the grassroots where people are as rigid and ignorant as they want to be because *umuntu angayenza noma yini noma yisiphi isikhathi* (people can do whatever they want, whenever they want). I think this is what we should try and change because at a time when we want to have substance in this world, *asikwazi ukuthi singavuma ukuthi siyi facilitate leyo nto* (we cannot allow ourselves to foster this attitude).

**Katlego Chibamba (KC):** Where do I begin? I am Katlego Chibamba.

I am an activist.

I am a lover of human beings.

I am a lover of justice.

I am a lover of community and collective living.

I have the privilege of serving as the global programme officer at Positive Vibes Trust for a project called Free To Be Me.[1] The programme is in its final year of implementation.

My journey into this movement-building work began through grassroots activism and community organising, not long after I had come out to my family as a gay man back in 2010. Following this coming out, I relocated to Rustenburg, a city in the North West province in South Africa. This new chance to live in a new place would give me the opportunity to find my authentic expression and to live openly and proudly as a gay man. Unfortunately for me, there were no organisations around where I could learn more about this until I decided to start hosting dialogue sessions with my friends and colleagues. Soon, this led me to register what became the first LGBTQI+ organisation in Rustenburg. Gays and Lesbians of Rustenburg (GLOR), as I called this organisation, was doing predominantly advocacy and campaigns, community mobilisation, promotion of health and well-being as well as social justice work.

Around the same time, I was studying for an LLB degree at the University of South Africa. I noticed a gap in knowledge about LGBTI+, which led me to establish a student group called GLOUSA – Gays and Lesbians of the University of South Africa, the first such organisation in this institution. Since I was a part of the institution, I became increasingly aware

of how knowledge was created and was somewhat unhappy with the practice of going to communities to acquire data but never going back to help address some of the emerging or known challenges. Researchers are almost always the winners, as they earn degrees and win awards for their work.

The knowledge created was often about us by them rather than ours with them. It is our voices and stories that are being heard and documented, even though we receive neither acknowledgement for nor benefit from the potential changes to which our stories might contribute. I am a big fan of the phrase "Nothing About Us Without Us," and that was what drove me to start these organisations. My recognition of how knowledge was created led me to seek out institutions such as Positive Vibes and Gala that centre community voices and lift experiences. Through these experiences, I learned a lot and I took that knowledge back into the work that I was doing through GLOR and GLOUSA, and that has helped my personal and career advancement to where I am today, serving the global development sector.

## How do your organisations conceptualise queer knowledge and its creation?

**MZZ to KC:** Can you tell me a little more about this idea of "knowledge from the community" and how you relate to it? Does your work – either previous or current – also touch on this?

**KC:** At Positive Vibes Trust, knowledge creation is embedded in everything that we do. We use methodologies such as "Looking In Looking Out" (LILO), which are products of Positive Vibes Trust. These are participatory learning processes that help individuals and communities explore identities, build self-acceptance and develop advocacy skills rather than just extract information from communities. We facilitate processes whereby knowledge emerges through dialogue, reflection and shared experiences. The "accompaniment approach" at Positive Vibes means that we work alongside communities as they generate insights and document their own realities.

At Positive Vibes, I'd say knowledge creation is inherently political and transformative. It entails community members gathering in a safe space to share stories, document lived experiences and collectively analyse the social

forces that shape their lives. It involves recognising diverse ways of knowing, not just academic or technical, but knowledge embodied in cultural and spiritual practices. For us, knowledge creation happens through participatory workshops that we often run across various countries. It involves community dialogues and, in some instances, art-based methods and collaborative research in which community members are researchers rather than subjects of research. It's about challenging who is seen as the knowledge producer and validating forms of knowledge that have been historically marginalised.

**MZZ to KM and JJM:** What you said [about Newcastle Prideful Legends] is very powerful because I'm getting a sense *yokuthi lento eniyenzayo* (that what you do), as much as it's work, is also deeply personal *kini* (for you). Can you tell me more about Newcastle Prideful Legends? What does the organisation do and how does it relate to knowledge creation?

**JJM:** iNewcastle Prideful Legends, abbreviated as NNPL. *Ngendlela engingayibeka ngayo ukuthi* (the best way I can explain it is), NNPL is a dynamic LGBTI+ human rights organisation. Of course, it's based in Newcastle in South Africa … It is dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of LGBTI+ individuals. We do that by combating homophobia, hate crimes, discrimination and so on. We adopt a comprehensive approach to advocate for the rights of LGBTI+ people and foster understanding, acceptance and inclusion of families and the broader community, because we also believe *ukuthi* (that) we are advocating for not only LGBTI+ people but the community. We create knowledge and gather information through, for instance, lived experience. There are experiences of people *asikhuma* communities *okuwukuthi* we advocate for *ngoba* (we are in communities with and we advocate for because), if we advocate for LGBTI+ and we are addressing hate crimes, we can collect real-life stories that might otherwise go unheard. Because there are people experiencing hate crimes in our communities and because we are part of the grassroots of the community, we can get information about such occurrences and use it to create awareness about the problems faced by the LGBTI+ community. These narratives, in a way, *zigcina ziba* essential *eziba ngama* data points (end up being essential and become data points) for understanding the impact of discrimination and the needs of marginalised communities. When I say marginalised communities *engqondweni yami ukufaka ukuthi* (the thought that comes to mind is that)

LGBTI+ people are not the only marginalised people; we also have *abantu aba* disable (differently abled people) in the communities. So, we stand for them also because they are marginalised. That's why we say that as much as iNNPL advocates for LGBTI+ people, it also advocates with the communities. We do that through community education and awareness, whereby NNPL fosters understanding by, for example, talking to schools, women's and men's forums, workplaces and communities about LGBTI+ issues. The dissemination of that information helps to shift public perception and *ngandlela thize* (in some way) to dismantle harmful stereotypes. How we do that [in NNPL], *ngoba sisho ukuthi* (since we ask), "How do we collaborate?"—I would say partnership, for one thing. Recently, we have been working with amaJuba College and other activists. By so doing, we share the same ideas to further expand the knowledge base through our presence in the communities, because talking about tertiary institutions means going there and obtaining a platform to talk to the students. That way, we disseminate information, you know, and the knowledge that we generate and share as activists, Mahlobo and I, leads to greater awareness. This is without saying much about legal progress because we've been picketing at some of the events. That legal progress means something to us because it's on the ground, and it also means something for cultural shift. I don't know if I've said too much, but I think I will leave it there for now.

**MZZ:** You can never say too much. There's never too much; if you would like to add something, Katlego, you can. I'm here to learn from you, so the more you bring, the more we can learn – not just me but even the readers too.

**KM:** What I would like to add is that whilst we are focusing on the passing of information from stakeholder to stakeholder, we also recognise that we are going through these lived experiences. We are aware that many times it becomes traumatic, so we also offer psychosocial support in conjunction with our partners, such as LifeLine and our social workers from DSD.[2] It also helps, whilst we are still trying to build a world where we are all inclusive and loving of one another, that we try to work through unhealed past experiences. As we are going through this journey, we are trying to dismantle *lezi zinto ezenzeka* (the things that happened) in the past and to change now to a better narrative in the future. It is also very important for us not only to gather the data that is needed to erase a lot of these things that perpetuate gender-based

violence, hate crimes, discrimination and homophobia towards LGBTI+ people, we also know that there is some psychosocial support that we need to provide for these individuals to help them continue to live full lives after the trauma that they might have endured.

## What methodologies and strategies are used to create queer knowledge in global South contexts?

**MZZ to KC:** You mentioned participation and collaboration. I'm familiar with Participatory Action Research methodologies, and something that I'm really interested in finding out from you is, once this knowledge is generated collaboratively:

- Where does it go?
- What do you do with it?
- Who does the knowledge belong to?

**KC:** The knowledge created through our processes is collectively owned by us and the communities we work with. We collectively determine what we do with the knowledge. Usually, it informs community-led advocacy and strategies and campaigns that shape organisational programming and contribute to movement building. Oftentimes, it's the work that we do through LILOs; we take people through person-centred workshops that become transformative for them … People are offered an alternative perspective, and [they can] think differently around the same issues that they have been facing. We support communities in packaging knowledge and in [adopting] accessible formats such as visual materials, digital stories and community reports that can be shared widely.

Sometimes knowledge remains within the community for internal reflection and growth, but at other times, with proper consent, we help communities share their insights with policymakers, funders, or other broader audiences to influence the social change that we want to see.

**MZZ:** Amazing. You mentioned LILO, Looking In Looking Out. What is this Looking In Looking Out?

- Is it a methodology?
- Is it an approach?
- Is it a philosophy?

**KC:** Back in 2010, our current executive director had the task of creating workshops … Communities were saying, "Look, we are done, and we want to be able to have a deeper understanding about our sexuality, about our gender diversity". As you know, there've been quite a number of sensitisation workshops, but in principle those just teach people about the terminologies, how to navigate around people in the LGBT or other marginalised communities. It doesn't really take people through a deeper personal journey towards their own understanding of their gender and sexual identity.

The LILOs are one of the personal methodologies that we've created at Positive Vibes. We have about 20 of those methodologies; they are person-led, person-centred and facilitated in a way that helps people go through a journey of their own life, how they came to realise who they are … and how they are perceived. We have four different parts where we look backwards at where we came from, and then forward to where exactly it is that we are going with our lives. One of the first methodologies to have been established was the LILO identity, which is executed as a three-day workshop that takes people through their own journey … Firstly, language: how language can be political and … how language can also be dangerous in many ways. Their understanding of the language [is an important consideration]: what do you understand bisexuality to be? How did you become bisexual, and what is your story with it? And then we take people through writing about or reflecting on their own life from the time they were born, and in between they see and draw the trend for themselves as to what their journey really has entailed … up to the time that some of them may have come out, how that has been. Has it always been a positive story? Has it always been a negative story? And what that opportunity does, is you look at it, and it gives you a reflection of where life could be going. You know, there may have been moments when one experienced very deep challenges, but also some … positive sides. What that exercise does is help us centre our circle of influence.

You are able to … see those who have been the really supportive people in your life, who have enabled your voice and supported your journey of

learning and becoming. Who are some of the people who haven't been very supportive and have been distracting in the ways that you know? And in [doing] that, you can cast them aside and focus more on the people that you know bring life to you, encourage you to be a better person, and are much more interested in helping you grow. And then it goes much deeper, with a look into relationships that we have, not just with our intimate partners, but with our families and friends, and what kind of people we are. It helps us look at some theories, such as the Johari Window:

- What we think about ourselves?
- How people look at us?
- What are the opportunities?
- What are some of the challenges?

So, basically LILO is a personalised approach that takes people through their own journeys but is facilitated through various processes.

**MZZ to JJM and KM:** *Uyazi into efika engqondweni njengoba benikhuluma ukuthi, indawo ne ndawo ziyahluka* (what came to mind as you were speaking was that places/communities differ). I am sure even in Newcastle, there are urban areas, townships and many rural areas. There are also younger people – the youth – people who are older, Zulu people, among others. Do all these things influence your work, because looking at your processes, you are not only interested in creating knowledge but there is a strong emphasis on dissemination. So, *ngifuna ukwazi ukuthi izinto ezifana ne ndawo en'kuyo, abantu akhona iya* (I want to know how things like location and the demographics of people in attendance) affect the way you create and disseminate knowledge.

**JJM:** *Indlela engiyibona ngayo* (the way I see it), where and how it is done would relate to cultural norms. The conversation with society is important in our knowledge creation, which focuses on and maybe even challenges deeply rooted prejudices. For geographical location, we can compare rural and urban areas: the latter may have more resources for activism and the former may require localised grassroots knowledge sharing. The communities' needs and priorities depend on what issues are most pressing there, for instance, healthcare access, mental health, and maybe protection from violence. It is

important to check where you are, who you are going to bring that information to, and the way you're going to do it, *mhlambe ne* (and maybe the) language and communication style. The knowledge and how you share it must be culturally sensitive, based on literacy, language and access to technological resources. For instance, in a rural area *asikwazi ukuphatha ama* (we cannot bring) slides and do our presentation. We clearly cannot disseminate information if we come with that mindset because istorytelling *yethu* (our storytelling) will not be that effective. It's very important because we can be limited *ukuza ne* mindset *yokuthi sizokhuluma nge* advocacy *endaweni enamakhosi* (if we go to an area under traditional leadership with the mindset that we will talk about advocacy). For instance, uMahlobo identifies as transgender and uses he/him pronouns while I use she/her, so *uma siya endaweni eye* rural area *sifuna ukuyo* sensitise *amakhosi* (so when we go to rural areas to sensitise traditional leaders), there is no way I am going to go there *bese ngifuna ukugqoka ibhulukwe* in that area *yase emakhosini* (and insist that I want to wear trousers in that area led by traditional leaders). *Mina ngoba* I identify as he, *kufanele ngizitshele ukuthi kufanele ngigqoke isiketi ngoba ngiya enkosini njengamanje* (even though I identify as he, I need to wear a skirt because I am going to the monarchy). You must use strategies whether you like it or not. *uMhlobo uwuMhlobo*, *u* believe and *uyile nto ayiyo* are *yiyo* (Mahlobo is Mahlobo, he believes and is what he is) – there's nothing you can change about that – but *ukuze ungene kumuntu ume* penetrate (you are trying to get through to someone). *Angisho ukuthi kuzoba njalo* but uMhlobo might be forced *ukuthi ahambisane nami agqoke isiketi ngoba manje sifuna okuyokhuluma naleya nkosi ukuse idedele induna zendawo ukuthi* they give us *islot uma kuba nomcimbi yenkosi* to come and sensitise *obaba no mama* (I am not saying it will be like that, but uMahlobo might be forced to wear a skirt like me because we want to speak to the king/chief to instruct the local traditional leaders – induna – to give us a slot during the king's/chief's ceremonies so we can sensitise the people in attendance). *Ukuze ubanikeze inhlonipho before bakuxosha ungakafiki* (we show them respect so we can gain access). You'd rather be there and look presentable – for them – so they can at least give you an ear. This is important because understanding the context ensures that knowledge is relevant, impactful and accessible. It allows us – as

activists – to tailor education, advocacy and resources to the specific needs of that environment.

**KM:** *Ucinisile* (you are right), because even in the context *ayibeka ngayo uJabu* in that *ukuze umuntu umuzuze ngicabanga ukuthi* (that Jabu is articulating, to win someone over), we must conform even as we want to extend the scope of the information. This also applies with religious leaders. In one instance where we came across religious leaders, we felt *ukuthi kulo mthandazo akusesi wumthandazo nje sekuwuthandazo* (that what they were saying was no longer just a prayer, but words intended to) condemn me as a person. *Manje* (now), for you to change their mindset, you [need] to know [how to] use the same Bible, contextualise it, and help them to understand *ukuthi le esiniyikiphala bazalwane ayikhombisi uthando ingathi singabuya silifunde futhi le* Bible (that the words they were sharing, as Christians, do not show the love that calls us to come together to read the Bible) in the [way] it is supposed to be used. So now Zamokuhle, you find yourself in a space where you might have promised yourself you would never set foot in church because of experiences that you might have had. Now you are working within a human rights organisation, where you need to work interfaith to change the narrative that is already going on within the religious space. The only way to change that is to be within that uncomfortable space and then drive the narrative from the inside rather than from the outside where you [would not be able] to monitor and evaluate what direction this is taking. Believe me, as uncomfortable as it is, it works because *uthi awufuni wena ukuba sendaweni sase sontweni or endaweni enamakholwa ngoba iqiniso lithi umuntu usuke aya esontweni ngoba usuke azi ukuthi umphefumulo wakhe umuholela kanjani nokuthi* (you may say you don't want to be in a religious space or around religious people, but the truth is that people turn to religion because their souls feel drawn to it and perhaps this is where they find healing). What we now need to do is change their approach to marginalised groups, so that the scripture is not used to bring harm to the rest of the world. This also applies to the political space where *umuntu uzokutshela nge* organisation *yakhe* (someone approaches you to tell you about their organisation) – for instance, the DA[3] or EFF[4] – and how they drive the mission within the political space, not understanding that *nami ngiza nokwami nawe uza nokwakho* (I come with my

own and they have theirs), and we all need to find common ground. So that we now actually have a sense of equality and inclusion in South Africa.

**MZZ:** Yho, I am learning so much and it's interesting because the knowledge you create and the work that you do is not coming from outside the community – if I understand correctly. You are saying that you are part of the community, and you will make the changes, and you will collect and disseminate the stories while you are inside the community, and you navigate these different spaces as a part of the community. What is the most interesting thing that you found as you were collecting these narratives? Please don't expose any personal information, but just in general, is there something interesting or that you were not expecting?

**KM:** Well, I think my most interesting was a workshop we had with a fraternity *nomfundisi* (that had a pastor) – *sizothi wumfundisi* Mdletshe (let's call him Pastor Mdletshe). *uMfundisi Mdletshe sasine* sure *ukuthi uzosikhipha ngama celemba* the way *bebadinwe ngakhona mekezwa nge* (we were sure that Pastor Mdletshe would take us out with machetes because of how angry he was to hear about the) topic of discussion. We had introduced the workshop as an event about contextualised Bible studies but then re-introduced it under the concept of understanding the LGBTI+ communities. *Uma ezwa ngendaba ka* LGBTI+ community, *hayi wadinwa into eningayazi* (when he heard LGBTI+ community, he was furious), but by the end of that workshop, Zamo, you won't believe we got hugs and kisses. He even told me, "*Uyindodana yami ngemphela wena nalaba engaba xosha layikhaya ngizobalanda*" (You are really my son. I will even ask the members I chased away to come back). That was the most humbling moment we had experienced *in sino* Jabu (with Jabu). I feel that every moment when we have had *abazali* (parents) openly declare that "*Bengahlulela umntanami ngoba bengingazi nge* gender and sexuality *manje ngiyabona ukuthi bengizonda umntanami, ngimuzondela into engekho*" (I used to judge my child because I did not know about gender and sexuality, but now I see that I hated my own child over nothing). *Ayikho into ejabulisa umphefumulo wethu ngangaloko* (nothing fulfils our souls more than that) because when we see that we are making a change – no matter how small it may be – there is change.

**JJM:** I will just take a similar scenario when we were in a space with religious leaders who push this narrative that homosexuality is a sin, but after all the work we did – which was hard – there were tears and exchange of words. However, one thing that happened that day absolutely amazed me and made me ponder how we do our work to achieve an impact. There's nothing that beats knowing that you've stood in front of people for three hours, talking to them, educating them and getting information from them, because the way I see it is [there's give and take] every time when we work – we learn from the participants. One thing that really struck me was when one of the religious leaders who is very influential and is also in the LGBTI+ community stood up and said, "For 30 minutes we're going to have a meeting with the LGBTI+ community." She said this when the religious leaders were also in the main hall and asked the LGBTI+ people to meet her in a certain room because there was something that we needed to discuss. To my surprise, I had about five religious leaders in the room, and I was confused – asking myself, "Didn't they get the memo or something?" She also noticed that there were religious leaders amongst us, so she reiterated, "I asked for LGBTI+ individuals only for this meeting; not that I'm discriminating, but there is something that we need to discuss as an LGBTI+ community. This is outside of the workshop; it's something else based on what I do as an activist." When those pastors responded, "We are also LGBTI+ people," I'd never been so surprised in my life, and everybody was in disbelief. The pastors confessed, "After everything that you guys taught us, we now admit that the reason why we hated the LGBTI+ people was because we are them, but they could do things that we couldn't do, and we hated them because they openly accepted who they are. Today, we have to say enough is enough; we are preachers of the Word and we've been pushing the narrative that homosexuality is a sin, but now we know that we have been lying to ourselves – as preachers – and we are not going back to our churches and spreading lies." They said, "We are coming out right now in front of you, and we are so sorry for discriminating." That was amazing for me, and till today when we meet with them, they are so kind, and they are accepting – of who they are – before they accept us. So, for me that was a breakthrough.

**MZZ:** What! Yho! I did not see … [speechlessly in shock]

**KM:** These are stories of change, and no matter how small the change is –

**JJM:** *Kuqala kancane kancane* (it starts small).

**KM:** As much as we may think there is no progress, there are narratives that are being changed, minds are being changed, perspectives are being changed. We just need to appreciate that change happens at different intervals.

## What challenges do grassroots organisations experience when creating knowledge about gender and sexual diversity in Africa? How do they thrive despite the challenges?

**MZZ to KM and JJM:** You touched on something really interesting, you know, Katleho, you mentioned trauma, and I'm sure when you are retelling the stories and doing this work, collecting this data, these narratives and lived experiences – it might not be the easiest thing. I'm just wondering, what are some of the challenges that you might be facing in the process, and how do you navigate them?

**KM:** I want to say it's not easy. You know, organisations carry people's lived experiences very well, but it's so heavy because we all have stories to tell. The biggest thing is that while you're listening to all these lived experiences, you yourself have a story to tell. I have been triggered, I don't know how many times, and I still get triggered *namanje* (to date). I've felt that at times it's important that we as activists also seek therapy because we go through things in the movement and *ekhaya* (at home), or a traumatic experience that might have happened.

Our organisations live on grant funding and in moments when you can't supply the help that you know you would have been able to offer had you had the means, it also hurts. We would have felt a lot better knowing that we are changing some scenarios at home. We are actually changing some journeys that people are undertaking in their lives because [of] the magnitude of our work and the life-changing experiences that we come across. We have all met people in the first session of whatever workshop or dialogue [who] show all homophobic traits, *akhulume uzwe ngathi* (and they speak till you're emotional) in the middle of the session. But you can't yield to emotions because you need to change the mind of this person, and in the process, you find that there is a story behind this person's homophobia. *Usa'* experience

into *yokuthi* this person *mhlambe ekhaya kukhona okwenzeka, kwakune* sexual assault (the homophobic person also might have had traumatic experiences such as sexual assault). I'm telling you it becomes intense, and there comes a point when we also find ourselves needing the counselling that we offer to *abantu esisuke sibasiza* (the people we are helping). Yeah, so I think as far as trauma and reliving *ezinye zale zinto* (some of these things), Zamokuhle, it happens all the time. I don't want to say it is something that you can switch off today and back on tomorrow. It's constantly there, yet the community needs you to be their pillar of strength. I think that is the greatest burden that we as activists carry: trying to make the change that everybody wants to see without having to show our community that we are carrying a lot.

**JJM:** I love what you just said, Mr Mahlobo. To reiterate, for me, the key words are discrimination and stigma because now there's always going to be challenges when we face resistance from communities, maybe [from] all the people who hold prejudiced views against LGBTI+ people. We do have discrimination and stigma on our shoulders. Another major issue that Mahlobo touched on, which is true, [is that] as an organisation and activists, we face security and safety risks because *abantu* (of people). There will be threats, harassment, or violence against activists by people who were participants in some advocacy efforts and who then turn around and attack us. We also face resistance from big people, like gatekeepers. I am talking about religious leaders and law enforcement, for instance. You find that just because you are working as an activist, there are discriminatory beliefs against you, restrictive laws and a lack of legal recognition. Because when you report a case at the police station, for example, [when] we do referrals and linkages and we bring a person who is being abused, maybe physically or sexually, we confront secondary victimisation. So, those people [service providers] would think that because it's an LGBTI+ issue that it is okay for the victim to be further victimised. Those are the challenges.

We have limited resources … If an individual who is not LGBTI+ was raped, the case would be handled well, but with an LGBTI+ person, then there's a lot of mental and emotional strain. Being an activist and being an organisation for human rights, there are internal conflicts, even among us and within the community. We face such challenges, and sometimes we want representation and visibility because there's exclusion maybe, of certain

identities within the LGBTI+ spectrum *njengabantu aba* (like people who are) non-binary and intersex individuals. So, in advocacy, there's a lack of representation.

Despite all these challenges that Mahlobo and I mentioned, we persist. We're still going to have strategic partnerships and community-driven approaches. We're going to help in overcoming variance and creating meaningful impact. We will never stop; we will face these challenges. We're just going to tell ourselves from what we've learned and everything that we went [through … with] limited resources, mental strain, whatever it is that we mentioned, we shall have that resilience and move on.

**MZZ:** Iyho … wow! I can feel the emotions as *nikhuluma* (you speak). It's the passion, but it's also the heaviness of the work … Both of you spoke about lack of resources, financing, funding, and I'm wondering how this affects your work. Particularly when it comes to collecting narratives, does it affect what type of data or stories or the knowledge you create? Does the funding also come with, "We want you to do this particular work"? Or is it the organisation that controls or says what the community needs?

**JJM:** [Laughing] Yho, yho, yho – that topic! I didn't want to talk about it, but I'd say funding becomes a challenge. Funders have their own priorities. They come with a specific criterion; for instance, currently we have an issue with USAID and PEPFAR. Those are the funds for HIV/AIDS literacy and how people are dealing with HIV, and whether they are adhering to their medication. Funders can say, "This is what we want you to do", whereas we may have a broader focus. This limits us because we must use such funds for HIV/AIDS and treatment literacy. That affects the organisation if it cannot [address HIV/AIDS], but at NNPL, we have a broad spectrum of things that we want to do. Our strategy is wide; of course, it includes HIV and AIDs. But now, let's say we have employed four or five people who are going to be in the field. Imagine those people having to do only HIV/AIDS work because that's what we have money for. What about GBV? We don't have funds that can help us go and do GBV projects. On the ground, as Mahlobo has mentioned, we find ways to collaborate with other stakeholders and do GBV awareness campaigns. That way we are a collective because now we must find ways … There's also political influence, which is very clear right now with Trump and

his shenanigans. That political influence also hinders us as NGOs and NPOs because, remember, we are a non-profit organisation … But these political influences also hinder us from reaching more people. So, sometimes we have limits, I must say, because there is no accessibility. We need to know who gets to participate where, how we can find that person who's going to help us … How are we going to pay that person, because they're going to need money from us to do the work, you see? So, it's rather difficult … we may sound as if we are emotional, but we not only have a vision and a mission; we also have a passion for what we do. Our passion pushes us because without it, I'm telling you, we would have given up a long time ago.

**KM:** That is absolutely correct, when uJabu mentions that without passion, we would have given up a long time ago. I think it is so even when there are these challenges of funding. I'm grateful to other organisations that currently have funding from other countries and can outsource and support smaller organisations around our area to help them continue with the work. *Kancane* (in a small way), it really does help and offload *ezinye zezinto esibekana nazo* (other challenges we are facing) because it is quite true that many of these things have a lot of political influence. Such political influence really does affect the work that needs to be handed over or done on the ground, and *sisafuna ama* (we are still looking for) processes to change and move things into a brighter light. *Siyodinga* Zamokuhle *ukuthi nalabo bantu esithi sicela usizo kubona, kobekhona indlela yokuthi siyabonga* and *iyive ibuhlungu* Zamo into *yokuthi* as much as *uwaziwa vele ukuthi vele ukuthi* (Zamokuhle, we also need to show gratitude to the people we requested help from, and it hurts when you are known to) work with community engagement, you deal with *abantu* (people), but *futhi ungakwazi ukubapha noma ubanana ekuhlaleni kwenu* (you can't even offer them a banana in your meeting). After they have spent two hours in a workshop, *awukwazi nokubapha ubanana ubabonga nje ngokuthi ngiyabonga namanzi* (you can't even offer them a banana; you just show gratitude by saying "thank you" and offering them drinking water). Yes, we understand that *abantu bafuna ulwazi lokuthi kuyenzakalani* (people want knowledge about what is happening), *ukuthi umuntu o trans kusuke kunjani emzimbeni* (what being trans means in relation to the physical body), *usuke acabangani engqondweni* (as well as psychologically). *Yonke leyo nto leyo uyacabanga ukuthi umuntu uze ne* diligence *yokwazi lelo lwazi* but *manje*

*uzophinda abuye yini ngelinye ilanga uma nomcele ukuthi eze azofunda olunge ulwazi* because it's not just trans people; *kukhona abantu aba* intersex, *ama* lesbian, *ama* gay, in fact the whole queer spectrum *bayadinga ukwaziwa* (we understand that the people come diligent and hungry for this knowledge; however, the question is, will they come back when we invite them for future workshops because it's not just trans people; there are intersex, lesbian, gay, in fact, we need to raise awareness about the whole queer spectrum). But *angeke abuye uma ngimuncisha ubanana lokuthi a ngcolise umlomo nokuthi amathe abuye emlonyeni* (they won't come back if we can't give them at least a banana to nibble on). You understand Zamokuhle *ukuthi sisuke singamema intsha kuphela ngoba simema nabantu abadala ogogo bexhukuzela beze* (we don't only invite young people; we also invite the elderly who come limping) to the venues that we rent to run these workshops and intervention programmes and provide these educational tools *ukuze umuntu uma ephuma akwazi uku disseminator emphakathini wakhe la ehlala khona* (so people can acquire knowledge and go and disseminate it in the communities they live in). *Uma siso focus ebantwini abatsha siyeka abantu abadala yilapho esizishaya khona ngoba kahle kahle kumele sicele ebantwini abadala bese siza nabo ngoba angeke kulunge uma siyigcina kithi ama* young adult and the youth (we would be doing society a disservice if we focused on the youth and excluded the elderly; we need to start with the elderly before [we get to the] young adults and youth like us). *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you).

**MZZ to KC:** As you were speaking, I just kept thinking about a quote I read. I think it was by Carol [Hanisch], and it said, "The personal is political." That is what has been ringing in my mind this whole time, and I'm wondering, in the current state of the world, there seems to be growing conservatism and, with that, a privileging of this rigid, positivist approach to science that is unemotional, impersonal and looking for "facts". I'm wondering, since you are doing this type of work that is explicitly transformative, political and person-centred, what challenges do you face? Particularly within the African context.

**KC:** We face multiple challenges, and they are not just centred around Africa because we also work in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as well as Latin America. We face multiple challenges in this work, such as safety and security – which are paramount concerns. We have the criminalisation of same-sex

relationships in many African contexts. This means that knowledge creation processes must be carefully designed to protect the participants [with whom] we work.

There are also bigger challenges of navigating dominant narratives that position gender and sexuality as un-African or merely as victimising. So, our work involves creating spaces where people can articulate complex identities and experiences beyond the limiting frameworks that we are often given to work with.

Additionally, I happen to have had direct experience with [one of the challenges] because I used to work as a funder or a philanthropy development practitioner. Funding structures often privilege certain types of knowledge over others, with pressure to produce quick quantifiable results rather than support the slow, deep work of community-led knowledge creation.

**MZZ:** Mmmh, I've always been curious about this … Would you say that funding for creating knowledge, which is essential to the work, also influences the type of work or the type of knowledge that is generated? Particularly, I am thinking about how a lot of organisations in the global South depend on donations and funding from big organisations in the global North.

**KC:** Certainly! In multiple ways, remember, funding is about power because that's where resources are. So, power dynamics and priorities take precedence. Funders often set the agenda for what knowledge is considered valuable and which questions to explore, and this can result in research that aligns with their own interests rather than community priorities. Organisations such as ours, Positive Vibes, must then navigate these dynamics carefully to ensure that community needs are not sidelined in favour of donor-driven objectives. Many funders, for example, prefer quantitative approaches that produce measurable outcomes and quick results. This can discourage deep and time-intensive participatory methods that are often most appropriate for community-led knowledge creation. So, the pressure to demonstrate impact within short funding cycles limits exploration of complex and nuanced realities. We know very well that to change people's ideas and thoughts about what and how they've been made to believe for years is not something that will take 12 months or five years. It's a continuous process that can be observed over a period of time, yet oftentimes, funders give us limited

periods of time to complete it. Another element that I want to bring into this, is that of colonial power structures. As already mentioned, international funding often flows from the global North to the global South, reinforcing colonial power dynamics where northern institutions determine what knowledge about African communities is considered legitimate. This can marginalise indigenous knowledge systems and locally developed methodologies. I'm sure working in the field of research yourself as an academic, you come across this quite often.

One of the big challenges is sustainability, because if you're given money to do this piece of work for this period of time, there is no guarantee that after you do this work, there will be sustainable measures put in place. Because a lot of the work is project-based, which really is limiting as opposed to general funding that isn't specific to a particular project. Organisations working with gender and sexually diverse communities often develop creative strategies to balance the funders' requirements with community priorities. This might include building relationships with funders who understand participatory approaches, negotiating for flexible funding structures or completing funding projects within community-driven initiatives.

**MZZ:** Hmm … [intrigued]

**KC:** You know another point that I'm just thinking about is visibility bias. Funding often determines which knowledge gets amplified and circulated. Research that aligns with the donor's narratives may receive wider distribution than community-generated knowledge that challenges dominant frameworks. So, the key challenge becomes finding ways to leverage available funding while maintaining integrity in community-centred knowledge creation processes. This, in principle, requires transparent communication with both funders and communities. It depends on the willingness of communities [to generate knowledge] and especially funders to provide funding opportunities that would not compromise ethical commitments to community ownership.

**MZZ:** Where do you see knowledge creation or research from the global South in the next 5 to 10 years, looking at the current global political context with the funding cuts – particularly for work on gender and sexual diversity? What can we do?

**KC:** Look, one thing I'm really not so bothered about is funding that has stopped because it's funding that also had an agenda. I don't think we've lost much, if it's the kind of funding that we've constantly – for many years – been saying doesn't serve our communities. The mere fact that it has been taken away shouldn't bother us, shouldn't frustrate us to a point where we feel we cannot do anything without it, because that very idea [of our perceived helplessness] is the reason why they thought they could use means such as their funding to control how narratives are shaped.

I see several exciting developments on the horizon. First, I anticipate growing recognition of African scholars, activists and community researchers who are developing innovative, contextually grounded approaches to knowledge creation around gender and sexuality.

I also see increasing collaborations on the continent with networks of community researchers sharing methodologies and findings across borders, building a rich body of Africa-centred knowledge on gender and sexual diversity. I mean, the rise of digital technologies will also contribute to creating new possibilities for documentation and knowledge sharing, although we must remain vigilant about digital security and accessibility. Especially in our context, oftentimes we are seen as the late bloomers, because the world is already at an advanced AI stage, while we are still struggling with access to technology in some of our rural settings. But the idea is, we must be able to balance the two and see really how they are able to contribute to our communities, particularly in the rural areas. Most importantly, I believe we'll see more funding and institutional support for knowledge-creation processes in which gender and sexually diverse communities across Africa are not just participants but conceptual leaders shaping research agendas and methodologies. This shift will produce knowledge that more accurately reflects the complex realities of our communities and more effectively serves the movements for justice and liberation across the continent. And I believe that a conversation such as this will definitely not be taken lightly by an academic such as you, but that you will go back and challenge your fellow scholars to start looking at communities in a much more mutually beneficial way, as opposed to just a one-sided benefit approach.

**MZZ:** Sounds queer! Sounds very queer! It's the resisting, the subverting, the inventing, the negotiating … all of it sounds so queer.

## Critically reflecting on academics and research institutions from the perspective of grassroots organisations and activists, is the knowledge we create queer?

**MZZ to KC:** I'd like to take this conversation back into the personal. As you know, I'm an upcoming academic at the University of Cape Town, and it's really interestingly placed when we're looking at colonial legacies and apartheid. I want to know where you place us in this conversation because, so far, we've been speaking about the funders and the communities, but this is not a binary. Academics, scholars and students also play a role in knowledge production. What do you think about their place? What advice would you give or what things would you make us aware of that we might be blind to?

**KC:** When you speak of yourselves, [and] I'll set this around academics in general, because my voice predominantly comes from that of community members.

*MZZ:* Yes.

**KC:** I'm not an academic, so my feelings depend entirely on how research is to be conducted. When academics approach communities with respect, centre community priorities, share power throughout the entire research process and ensure benefits flow back to communities, such research can be valuable and contribute to important social change. Unfortunately, we still see too much extractive research, where communities are treated as data sources rather than knowledge partners. This perpetuates harmful power dynamics and produces knowledge that serves academic careers more than community needs. Personally, I believe the most valuable academic research happens through genuine partnerships with communities and organisations, where researchers are willing to be uncomfortable, challenge their own assumptions and share control over research questions, methods and analysis, as well as dissemination. So, if there is any advice, to be honest, it is to centre communities in your work – we are not just data sources. We are knowledge creators; we are partners in this. Our stories contribute to this idea that can

advance you, which is not a problem when we are dealing with an academic, but at the same time, it shouldn't just be a selfish way of advancing yourself with a master's degree or a PhD or an honours degree. It should be that the same community from which you've extracted the knowledge is also experiencing the change and the benefits.

**MZZ:** "We are not your data sources!" I've taken that in good faith.

**MZZ to KM and JJM:** Out of interest, I am curious to know how you feel about people from universities and big research institutions who come and do research on gender and sexually diverse people – or as you said, LGBTI+ people in communities.

**KM:** For me, yes, the research is being done but I feel that *indlela eba collect ngakhona i* data (the way they collect data) is not doing justice. Sometimes certain narratives are not written about because they "might be taken another way," but some of that information is what we need on the ground to help people navigate the challenges they come across. I mean, there are institutions and universities that conduct research on gender and sexuality, but *akusizi* (it doesn't help): of what use is [research] if it remains in your file and collects dust? While it is gathering dust, it is not being disseminated to the community where it is needed.

How can we deal with that? We can formulate relationships between researchers and human rights organisations that would enable us to assist the university in going back to the community with those findings and spreading the word. We should educate [our communities] and make intervention plans because *kuyadingeka ngemphela ukuthi* (it is imperative that) once we have done the research and collected that data, it shouldn't be used just for office purposes. Because when we collect the data, we often don't realise that it is needed back in the community to help them update some of their ways of working.

**JJM:** To add to what you are saying, I'm not discriminating against any research that is being done by academics, I think they really must do the work. However, *lento ingibuyisela kule nto ebengikhuluma kuyo ye* funding (this is taking me back to my previous point on funding). On the ground, we have constraints of funding, and I think for them [academics], it's even worse because they rely on external [funds], and they cannot do community-led

research because they would have to be present in the study area. They don't do that, and even if they do, they're going to rely on surveys and interviews that are online and whatnot. They don't get to the ground. *Ama* academic *mina ngibona ngathi* they are disconnected from lived realities, *bane* theory *ne* knowledge, (I think academics are disconnected from lived realities; yes, they may have the theory and knowledge) but they're disconnected from the day-to-day reality of community life. They may not fully understand the level of experience of gender and sexuality for diverse people, such as personal impact, stigma, discrimination or violence. Their research is based on academic standards or theory that doesn't necessarily align with the life experiences of those they study. They overlook complexity or the small differences between identities in real-life contexts. *Bane* over-reliance on theory *ngendlela abayifunda ngayo* cause *sebabona i* survey from *usban-bani abangamazi* (they are over reliant on theory in the ways they work, hence you will find them using a theory they recently read about that is created by somebody they don't know); they take that context and think they can come up with something. It is good enough, but it disconnects from lived experiences.

If they would come to our workshops, they would get even more information. As I said before, *ukuthi nathi uma siyosebenza siyafuna* from *ama* participants, *izinto esisuke singazazi* sometimes *njengama* traditional things that are happening and academics *abawazi ama* traditional objectives *nezindlela abantu* – like religious leaders – *abayithatha ngayo i* sexuality (we also learn from participants when we work, particularly about things we didn't know before, like traditional things that are happening. And academics don't know traditional objectives and different ways people – like religious leaders – understand sexuality). The time constraints of academic [work] also impose limits because, for example, they'll be given a task to do from now until May, when they could have a longer engagement if they came to these workshops and got even more information. So, I'm not against it, but their work is short term and after they're done, they start another thing. If they were to work in a larger institution, they could approach knowledge creation from the bottom up, *basebenzisa ama* (and employ) methodologies that emphasise the insights and wisdom of the local communities. My concern is, can they go to the communities because, as we are an advocate organisation, we deal with these

things on a day-to-day basis? Even in colleges, whenever we go to those academic areas, we learn new things *ngalabo bantwana* (from those young people) and from their ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. So, if academics were to come to the community, *babuye bane* (they would return with that) meaningful benefit that got them involved in the first place. This is not just in the short term but also in the longer term because another important thing is adaptability – things change. *Indlela u* "gender and sexuality" *wayenziwa nayo ngo* (the way people approached "gender and sexuality" in) 1920 is different from now, so we need to adapt, and we need to make use of technology sometimes.

As I previously mentioned, in rural areas, I can't go with gadgets; *kufanele ngifike ngikhulume isiZulu bangizwe abantu abadala ukuthi ngikhuluma ngani* (I need to speak in isiZulu so the older people can also understand what I am talking about) because not everybody is technologically inclined. Technology and methods like surveys work where people have access, but in many cases, I fear they still have a long way to go.

**MZZ:** If there was one piece of advice or something you would like to say to academics, what would it be?

**JJM:** *Mina ngicela ukusho, angazi noma ngiyithukuthela yini, ningixolele* (I would like to go first. I think I might be getting upset now, please forgive me). *Ama academic, abenze I* Community-Based Participatory Research *ikhona lento ngiyayazi* (academics should use Community-Based Participatory Research methods; yes, I've heard about it). They need to actively involve the community members in all the stages of their research, from defining the study to data collection and analysis. They should ensure that the knowledge generated is relevant and grounded in local experience. Surveys do not give an accurate reflection of reality because they may portray some people as homophobic, whereas if you talked to them, you would understand where they are coming from. So, instead of extracting information from communities, academics must co-create knowledge because doing so empowers community members to help shape solutions to their problems.

Mahlobo and I work very closely as director and deputy, and we have developed a system that enables us to do monitoring and evaluation within our workshops. This helps us know what people leave the workshop knowing,

but also to get solutions from them. We just need to ask the right questions because they have answers within them.

Academics also need to respect privacy and confidentiality. I like that you previously mentioned that we should not reveal sensitive information because that shows respect for confidentiality. Another thing is that academics should respect local norms and traditions. As I mentioned, uMahlobo would even go so far as *ukugqoka isiketi ukuhlonipha amakhosi* (to wear a skirt to respect traditional leadership) when we go to speak with them because it won't hurt us to compromise for a day to leave a message that will be impactful and bring about change. Of course, it won't be comfortable, but it takes being uncomfortable to bring about change. Hence, I say even the research institutions and academics should create methodologies that respect local norms as well as social, cultural and political contexts. This will help build trust with the communities, which is key to building long-term relationships and reliability with the participants. It takes trust to engage in meaningful knowledge creation because people want to know if you are invested in their community beyond the research.

Lastly, there should be a two-way dialogue, and the research should also benefit the community. For instance, *uma umama eza ku* workshop, *uhamba sika e* understand *ukuthi umntwana wakhe uma ethi uyi* transgender *njengo* Mahlobo *kusho ukuthini* and *usuyakwazi ukuyi handle umama* (mothers who come to the workshop would leave it knowing what it means if their children say they are transgender like uMahlobo, and such mothers are better able to handle it). *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you).

**KM:** I agree and uJabu has said a mouthful. *uCinisile* (I agree with your point) about the co-creation of the knowledge that we are actually trying to gather; it's very important. *Mhlambe ukube kungaba nendlela yokuthi* (maybe if there was a way for) academics to engage with human rights organisations and find ways to actually work with them, this would help them to enter the communities that the organisations advocate for. Thank you.

**KC to MZZ:** Zamokuhle, I think there's one thing that I wanted to speak to, which I don't think we necessarily went into much, it concerns the differences and similarities between how we, as community activists, create knowledge versus how people in universities do it. I think this is an important aspect that

I would like to just bring out before the conclusion of our conversation, so that we can clarify that a bit.

I think there are similarities, but also differences. For example, university researchers value rigour, ethics and systematic approaches to knowledge creation, which draw on many methodologies that originated in academic contexts, particularly Participatory Action Research, as you mentioned earlier.

**MZZ:** Mm hmm … [intrigued]

**KC:** However, our approaches differ in several key ways. Our primary accountability is to communities rather than to academic institutions. So, our metrics of success centre on whether knowledge serves community needs and advances social justice, not publications or academic prestige or degrees or the kinds of positions that people will get.

As I've said, we also challenge academic conventions regarding "Who counts as an expert?" Centring lived experiences as a valid and valuable form of expertise, rather than just mainstreaming a false separation between knowledge creation and activism, we explicitly recognise knowledge production as political work that should contribute to social transformation.

I think that's an important aspect out there and, in principle, to poke a little at the academics and in the way that you do things – if you really have created your own little Mecca there as academics, then it would be fair that you stay there and create and get the knowledge from where you are. But don't just use us as subjects to advance yourselves and not recognise us as the experts – because we are experts of our lives. Thank you.

**MZZ:** On that, you brought a thought to my mind. What do you want to say about the separation between academics and the community? Who is this community? And why are academics not a part of the community? This is something we need to interrogate more. When did uZamokuhle move from being a boy from the township to being this person who sits in this ivory tower? What happens through that separation and juxtaposition? Can we talk about that?

**KC:** So, let's problematise the binary. I find it important to challenge the oversimplified division between community and academia because this binary

often erases the complex realities of who we are. Many community activists are also scholars like you. Many academics themselves are members of gender and sexually diverse communities.

I see these categories as fluid and interconnected rather than as opposing forces. You asked me to dive a little more into defining what community is and what my understanding of an academic is. When I speak of community, I think we're referring to people with lived experiences as gender and sexually diverse individuals in African contexts. So, people whose daily lives are directly affected by issues being researched, but communities are not monolithic in the way that you would often describe them, as academics. There exist diverse perspectives, priorities and positions of privilege; some community members have formal education, others don't. Some are publicly visible activists, others remain private.

Our approach recognises this very complexity that I'm talking about, concerning the idea of community. Similarly, academics represent diverse positions and practices. Some academic researchers approach communities extractively, while others have developed deep, ethical, collaborative approaches. The institution of academia, with its particular reward system, methodology, methodological transition and gatekeeping practices, can create barriers even when individuals who are researchers have good intentions.

There is also another element regarding power and positionality. What matters most isn't whether someone is labelled as a community member or an academic, but rather their positionality and how they engage with power. Oftentimes, in the work that I do, we ask:

- Who defines the research questions?
- Who controls the methods?
- Who interprets the findings?
- Who benefits from the knowledge created?

These questions help us to navigate the complex terrain beyond just simple categorisation.

This is where I find – in conclusion – the bridging of the divide. In the work that I do, our most successful knowledge creation happens when we

transcend these divisions. We've often collaborated with academic researchers who bring valuable methodological expertise while respecting community leadership, and we've supported community members in accessing academic spaces to challenge exclusionary practices from within. The goal isn't maintaining separation but transforming how knowledge is created and valued across different spaces. This framing of knowledge acknowledges the legitimate concerns about power and exploitation in research relationships, avoiding essentialist categories that might limit possibilities for collaboration and hopefully transformation.

**MZZ:** Wow! That was a lot. I am speechless. Thank you so much.

**KC:** To have you be speechless, Mr Zulu, is an honour, because you are one of the people I know very well to never run out of words or things to say, to never run out of problematising things. Giving me the opportunity to speak on this platform has allowed me to make you speechless. I'm still shocked.

**MZZ:** Yeah, I don't have any words except "thank you." I think the readers and I have a lot of reflecting and introspecting to do. I think you called us out and called us in as academics – as knowledge creators – as we like to call ourselves, to really start to interrogate and transform. To re-imagine the ways in which we can engage with ourselves and the people we do research with – the experts in their own lives – as you said. So, I don't have anything further to add, thank you.

**KC:** Thank you, Mr Zulu. Thank you once again, and I'm hoping to have you share with me where the end results of this conversation will be so that I can engage with it. In principle, share these outputs with the community that I work with. I think I've respectfully been able to address some of the differences that exist. I think that this is an opportunity for us to start doing things correctly. It is good that in the very discussion that we're having, we have been able to share this knowledge, but also inform our community that we've had this conversation and to share it as widely as we possibly can. So, there is hope that the bridging of the divide will happen in our lifetime.

**MZZ:** Definitely, definitely. This will be publicly available on the *Feminist Africa* website and anyone who has access to the internet, whether on their mobile phones or at the internet cafe, can read it.

**KC:** We'd appreciate that indeed.

**MZZ to KM and JJM:** *Ngiyabonga* (Thank you). You gave me a lot to think about, take with me and educate others. As we are having this conversation, I'm also learning and I'm going to let others know this is how we can do research differently. I don't have any other questions, and I wanted to ask if maybe you had questions for me.

**KM:** *Into engayibuza ukuthi* (another thing I ask myself is), yes, I understand you're focused on the topic of knowledge creation, but then I want to understand why it is important for you to conduct these interviews. As we were saying earlier, yes, we have interviews like this but not many have access to this information. While it's important *ukuthi sibe nama interviews kanje* (to have interviews like this), I think it's important that we know how it is going to be beneficial to everyone, including you and the project itself, for this information *ukuthi iphume futhi iba sebenzele abantu* (to be out there and accessible to the people).

**MZZ:** That is a great question. I will start with the reason why I specifically chose knowledge creation. I chose to focus on this subject because I am currently studying towards a postgraduate [degree]. However, even while studying, I often question why we, academics, often look at things from a single perspective. This probing might also have been influenced by the fact that I'm a student who is also an activist. So, I thought, "*Hayi maarn!* (No, man!) There's a disconnect here." I don't have the words for it yet, but sometimes I feel like we are missing the mark somehow – as academics and as people who are still studying. I then thought if I could go to people who have the information, I could learn and bring that information to other academics, to say, "This is where we're going wrong, this is where we're missing the mark, and also, we are not the only ones who contribute to knowledge creation." Someone once told me that we academics in the university have a toxic sense of grandiosity, which made me even more critical of the institution. I also think we academics have many blind spots because of this separation from the community, and as someone who's inside the institution, I also can't see my own blind spots. Hence, I started this conversation as a way of learning and hopefully as a way of sharing the knowledge.

You also asked how this is going to help others. Firstly, I will share the link with you – if the publication accepts this piece – to add to your own dissemination. Secondly, I have a feeling that this knowledge will be helpful for organisations that are thinking about knowledge creation. I'm also hoping that this will reach funders and other researchers, inspiring them to ask themselves, "What can we do better?" That was my reason for doing this.

**JJM:** Wow.

**KM:** Thank you, Zamokuhle. The reason why I asked is to understand your passion, as you know the passion behind our mission and vision for the organisation and activism. So, I think I am speaking for myself and uJabu when I say thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to share some of the knowledge that we were able to offer in helping you, our community and our continent. Thank you so much for this opportunity; it was amazing.

**MZZ:** No, I should be thanking you for sharing your expertise.

**JJM:** Zamokuhle, can I ask a personal question?

**MZZ:** Of course, feel free.

**JJM:** Are you still a youth or *sokwandlula* (have you now passed that age)?

**MZZ:** Yes, I'm still a youth.

**JJM:** Well then, in closing, *ngingasho ke ukuthi* (I can now say) whether it's continental or globally accessible, this knowledge is going to increase and influence more youth breathing innovation – like yours. I think it will fuel the transformation we spoke about, of making knowledge a tool for development and a vehicle for social change and global influence. So, I'm really proud of what you did. Thank you, bro, I love what you did. Thank you so much.

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has had a reciprocal influence on my Master's research, and I believe this piece will foster epistemic justice in future studies. To my mentor, Jane Bennett, professor emerita of the African Feminist Studies department at the University of Cape Town, thank you for your guidance, critical engagement, and for encouraging my curiosity and hunger for transformation. Additionally, I would like to thank the editors for their editorial care. A big thank you to the queer community [queer elders, youth, ancestors and queers yet to come] for being, because your existence effortlessly embodies the magic that is world-making.

## Notes

1. https://hivos.org/free-to-be-me/
2. Department of Social Development
3. Democratic Alliance
4. Economic Freedom Fighters

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# *A Feminist Theory of Violence* by Françoise Vergès. Translated by Melissa Thackway. London: Pluto Press, 2022.

**Charmaine Pereira**

In *A Feminist Theory of Violence*, Françoise Vergès examines several broad questions concerning feminist theorising about violence. She aims "to contribute to the reflection on violence as a structural element of patriarchy and capitalism, rather than specifically male" (4). Vergès proceeds by eschewing an analysis of "patriarchy through the female victim/male perpetrator prism" (4), instead proposing "a critique of dependency on the police and the judicialization of social issues—in other words, of the spontaneous recourse to the criminal justice system to protect so-called 'vulnerable' populations" (4). Vergès argues that the analysis of gender and sexual violence cannot be partitioned from an analysis of the neoliberal conditions that produce such violence: "acute inequality, wealth concentrated in the hands of the very few, the ever faster destruction of living conditions, and politics of murder and devastation" (15). To separate the situation of women from a global context where violence is naturalised is to perpetuate a divide that benefits patriarchy and capitalism. In such a scenario, the question becomes one of identifying and punishing "violent men"; of naturalising the actions of the few without dismantling the structures that generate abominable violence (15).

In this review, I highlight three key themes in Vergès' theoretical focus and draw attention to some of the questions that arise from her approach. The first has to do with the embeddedness of violence in political economy and the unequal global order. This is arguably Vergès' most important contribution in this book: she rightly draws attention to structural features of the contemporary political and economic order, including the commodification of life itself and the normalisation of multiple forms of

violence. Her argument is that violence against women cannot be treated in isolation from a recognition that there is a global state of violence as a result of neoliberalism, "hyperglobalisation and the exacerbation of its extractivist logics" (13). I agree with Vergès that simply addressing gendered violence in terms of violent *acts* without recognising its structural dimensions is insufficient, both intellectually and politically.

However, this raises the question: is it appropriate or necessary to maintain a binary that partitions gendered acts of violence from the broader conditions that structure violence in general? Feminists have conceptualised sexual and gender-based violence as "a continuum that spans interpersonal and structural violence" (e.g. Manjoo 2012, 27), which suggests that the binary is not necessary. Moreover, even if greater attention were to be paid to transforming political, economic and social inequalities, should women who have been the targets of gendered violence not still have recourse to a system of accountability for that harm? What is to be done about the egregious cases of gendered violence perpetrated by individual men or gangs of men? Does the State not have responsibility for prohibiting such violence? What would inaction by the State entail for patriarchal and capitalist impunity, whether within the State or society at large?

This brings us to the second key theme in Vergès' theoretical focus, which is the State and its "politics of protection". Vergès discusses the workings of the State in relation to violence and punishment. She argues that the State cannot be relied upon to protect women since it is inherently violent and only protects some women while treating others as disposable. Moreover, "[a]s the instance that regulates economic and political domination, the State condenses all forms of *imperialist*, patriarchal, and capitalist oppression and exploitation. The State as an institution is thus far from playing a small part in the organization and perpetuation of violence against women, poor, and racialized people" (3, emphasis added).

As a former colonial power, France has retained a virtually unparalleled degree of political, economic, military and cultural subordination and control over its former colonies (Pereira and Tsikata 2021), although this exertion of power is currently being weakened in the West African subregion. Whilst Vergès' conception that the State condenses patriarchal and capitalist

oppression and exploitation applies to both the global North and South, the State in former colonies cannot be said to condense, in such a straightforward manner, all forms of imperialist power. It is true that some former colonies in the original BRICS[1] formation, such as Brazil and India, now operate as new imperial actors in Africa (Pereira 2024), but this is not a universal condition. Many African governments, unlike those in the global North, have economies dependent on primary commodities and are marked by complex and differentiated histories with differing relations to imperialism and colonialism (Pereira and Tsikata 2021). Given the resource-based conflicts and insurgencies of varying kinds in many African countries, what recourse to protection do beleaguered communities have other than the State? The existential conditions of refugees and stateless people are such that the power of the national State to effect more positive change in people's lives cannot be dismissed. While Vergès' point about the State's propensity to promote violence is critical, it is also the case that in countries of the global South, the State is required to be redistributive in principle, if not in practice. This points to the complexity of the question of gendered violence in relation to these co-existing, sharply contrasting dimensions of the State.

Vergès' analytical focus is on the structural conditions of violence in the metropole, with several examples based on the situation in France, Italy and the United States, and in some instances, France's 'Overseas Territories'. Consider the following statements: "While differences exist within all societies in their approaches to protection, it can be said that the patriarchal and capitalist State has reinforced these disparities, which have notably been racialized. In France, however, it is still very hard to study and publicly discuss the impact through the lens of race" (39). Vergès highlights the important fact of racism and racialisation in French political thought and the erasure of its impact on gendered violence during French colonialism. She goes on to state that the reason for recalling such facts is "because they belong to the history of State politics of protection, their racialization, and their sexism […]" (46), that is, the racialisation and sexism of the State's "politics of protection". Although the forms of violence that Vergès subsequently discusses are global in coverage, the State that she analyses is that of colonial and post-colonial France. Vergès does not acknowledge the

specificity of her claims about the State, and therefore the limits of these claims, even as she generalises their implications for a "politics of protection".

For example, Vergès refers to a "multiplication of measures, laws, and declarations concerning the protection of women and children alongside increased precarity, vulnerability, and violence against women and children" (33). While increasing precarity and violence characterise living conditions for most African people, there is no corresponding multiplication of laws and measures for the protection of women and children across the continent. In fact, there is considerable *resistance* to such measures in countries such as Nigeria, where it took 14 years for a coalition of committed activists to ensure that a law initially aimed at regulating violence against women was finally enacted as a law prohibiting violence against people in general, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015. Legislation prohibiting violence against *women* was cast as discriminatory, that is, as providing special protection to them, an indication of the opposition in the federal legislature to any law that supports the rights of women. Violence against women, girls and other members of marginalised groups is normalised and casually perpetrated with impunity by the State and other actors in Nigerian society. Ghana's Domestic Violence Act was enacted in 2007 after a seven-year process described as "long and arduous, fraught with contestations over the place of domestic violence legislation in an African context" (Darkwah and Prah 2016, 6).

The third major feature of Vergès' analytical focus is her emphasis on sharp differences among feminists in their orientation to violence, cast in binary and oppositional form: 'carceral' versus 'anti-carceral' feminists. "Based on notions of dangerousness and security, carceral feminism is an ideology that calls for courts to judge more severely and to hand down longer prison sentences, or for an increase in measures of surveillance and control" (62–63). As with her claims about the State, Vergès generalises cleavages in political orientations to violence among feminists. Feminists motivated by racialised, and racist, notions of dangerousness, risk and crime may indeed be pushing for such stern measures in France and elsewhere in the global North. But does that necessarily apply across the world?

In several African contexts, during the 1990s and 2000s, advocacy and mobilisation around the enactment of laws prohibiting gendered violence were carried out primarily by activists who engaged the State on the basis of gendered understandings of democracy. This was the case whether in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles, as in South Africa, or military rule, as in Nigeria. Underlying such efforts is the political principle that the State, particularly in a democracy and in the wake of authoritarian and repressive rule, should be held responsible for shaping polities and societies free from gendered discrimination and violence. This more recent phase of African women's legal activism forms part of a long trajectory of feminist organising, for example, by Women in Law and Development in Africa and Women and Law in Southern Africa. Such legal activism has continually sought to shape post-independence States in ways that acknowledge the citizenship status of African women and hold the State accountable for its actions and inactions.

The case against carceral feminism is made most forcefully in the United States (Davis et al. 2022), where key features of incarceration include the racist targeting of African American men and other people of colour, and the tremendous increase in the numbers of incarcerated people in private for-profit prisons over the last five decades or so. Between 1970 and 2009, the number of people in state and federal prisons alone increased from 196,429 people to 1.6 million, amounting to 722% (Cheung 2004, cited in Justice Policy Institute 2011). The number of inmates in private prisons surged more than **2,000**% between 1987 and 1996 (Sarabi and Bender 2000). Private prisons profit considerably from the exploitation of prison labour; prison lobbyists support political party campaigns as well as play a major role in shaping public policy on incarceration (Justice Policy Institute 2011). While public prisons have similar problems to those found in private prisons, such as violence, abuse, and a lack of services, the evidence suggests that these problems are worse in private prisons. Moreover, public prisons do not entail the conflicts of interest on multiple grounds that are generated by the prominence of private prisons and prison lobbyists (Justice Policy Institute 2011). In Africa, only South Africa currently operates private prisons, although Kenya is planning to do so (Perkins 2018). The spectre of private prisons in Africa, as structured in the United States context, is clearly one to

avoid and draws particular attention to the enduring question of how justice should be pursued in the wake of gendered violence.

*A Feminist Theory of Violence* provides much food for thought on how we understand violence, what can be done about it, by which entities, with what consequences, and the implications for feminist theorising and strategising. In the process, the book raises epistemological and political questions about the character of knowledge claims and their limits in this field. By depicting the State in localised terms whilst generalising its applicability, Vergès does not recognise the plurality of state formations and their inherent contradictions. She assumes the normative position that feminist relations with the State should be characterised by exit. Contrary to this, the historical and contemporary reality of sustained African feminist engagement with post-independence States points to the strategic question of *how* to carry out anti-violence activisms that address State accountability. Whilst Vergès' emphasis on the structural character of violence and its embeddedness in the unequal global order is more than timely, what is missing is a recognition of the role that feminists in France, for example, could be playing in holding their State accountable for its culpability in the violence that results from neoliberalism and the unequal global order.

## Notes

1. BRICS is a regional grouping of emerging powers originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Initially a grouping of countries going through rapid economic growth, BRICS is now a formal intergovernmental organisation that "aims to create greater economic and geopolitical integration and co-ordination among member states". Since its formation, BRICS has expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

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# *Research As More than Extraction: Knowledge Production and Gender-Based Violence in African Societies* edited by Annie Bunting, Allen Kiconco, and Joel Quirk. Ohio University Press, 2023

**Margo Okazawa-Rey**

"Research is more than extraction" is an obvious principle, a mantra, for studies about people's lives and most especially the lives of those who have suffered and still do from unimaginable yet all too frequent gender-based violence in times of wars and armed conflicts. Yet, historically, researchers from various disciplines have simply extracted "data" as impersonal bits and pieces, commodifying survivors' experiences before leaving the research sites, never to be heard from or to return. Papers and books are published and nothing more is said or done.

In their collection of essays, Annie Bunting, Allen Kiconco, and Joel Quirk have created a platform for academic researchers to share their experiences in painstaking detail. In the process, they expose their vulnerabilities as scholars truly committed to the well-being of those whose lives they seek to understand, and to intervening to change the conditions that led to the violence. All the authors, from and connected to both the Global South and Global North, write about their methodologies and the practicalities of doing research. They also write about their emotional, deeply personal reflections as researchers and concerned human beings and the various ways in which they may indirectly be a source of the problems being studied. The contributors to this volume demonstrate research praxes that often reflect what Indigenous Canadian scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) describes as "research is ceremony."[1] In these ways, *Research As More than Extraction* is a valuable guide for seasoned, novice, and student researchers.

The conceptual brilliance and practicality of the collection are reflected in its two-part organisation of the essays. The first focuses on dilemmas, ethical and methodological, that all researchers confront but do not necessarily recognise or attend to. The dilemmas described are "up close and personal." For example, in the opening essay, Teddy Atim raises the question of the safety and protection of research participants in post-war Uganda where neither could be assured. What are the researchers' roles? What can/should be done about their own safety and security? What is the relationship between both parties' concerns? What happens when the researcher is a member of a community who shared experiences with research participants but is now apart from them in terms of physical and social location?

Another example concerns the overturning of traditional cultural hierarchies based on age and gender, that is, gerontocracy combined with patriarchy, intersecting with class, race, and nation. Sylvie Bodineau, a French graduate student, and Appolinaire Lipandasi, a Congolese "research assistant" with extensive professional background, life experiences, and language and other skills, describe how they worked together and negotiated complex inequalities, both personal and structural.

A third example of ethical dilemmas concerns methodology for understanding and documenting experiences of children directly impacted by war, who may be joined to their mothers through militarised rape. This is what Beth Steward names "child-centered methodology." It is based on relationship-building and the use of multiple forms of expression to centre the children in ways that honour dignity and agency. The examples in the text speak for themselves.

What of the structural and institutional foundations of power relations, knowledge-production, voice, and agency? The second half of the collection addresses a myriad ways in which institutions, along with personal expectations, aspirations, and ambitions influence the conduct of researchers. Also included are questions of funding, the presentation of findings, dissemination of new knowledges, and claims of "ownership." Authors here critically analyse the power relations embedded in "partnerships," both North–South and university–community. Can researchers "serve two

masters," institutions as well as the people whose lives we commit ourselves to? To what extent are we, or should we be, beholden to funders and donors, and to those who may otherwise determine career paths? What about our responsibilities to people who have been violated and harmed in one way or another by the academic institutions, humanitarian aid organisations, and states of the Global North? Should we involve ourselves in reparations? If so, what should we repair and how? If not, why not? Is there a third way between "Yes" and "No" on this question?

Samuel Okyere explores the deep structures of inequalities, colonisation, and imperialism rooted in language, psychology, culture, socialisation, and accepted (dominant) standards of scholarship. This includes the normalisation of such manifestations by those in both dominant and subordinated groups. As Okyere argues, "even where the influence of the 'colonial matrix of power'… is acknowledged, measures to promote parity, inclusivity, and other redress mechanisms do not always materialize" (200). The other contributors cite their own examples. Okyere and others also trace the historical origins and the continuities and extensions, for example, of the British institution of slavery and other related histories of European colonisation. These points can likewise be applied to locations beyond the African continent where colonisation, imperialism, and multiple forms of violence have been and continue to be perpetrated, such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Syria.

Another contribution by writers of this section, which is fundamental to academic research, is the debunking and challenging of the idea of individual responsibility on the part of both the researcher and the participant as the core of research ethics. This individual responsibility model is made manifest through mechanisms such as institutionalised informed consent and human subject protocol reviews. They exist primarily to protect institutions. The challenge is even more crucial in this day of AI technology and its problematic use, specifically in tracking and representation, if we are seriously committed to protecting research participants in particular and people more generally, as scholars committed to the well-being of all.

Finally, the writers in *Research As Is More than Extraction* compel us readers/researchers to ask, repeatedly, the following questions as we conduct research and tell the stories of our participants: Where and when do we start the story of contemporary events? Who are the "experts"? On what basis is epistemological and ontological integrity determined, and who assesses it? Perhaps most significant, what is/are the purpose(s) of our research and who will benefit from it ultimately? As persons conducting research, how do our personal histories and current social location influence and impact questions raised in this collection, including the identification of contradictions? As researchers located in a diaspora, how do we understand our responsibilities to the participants? To whom must we ultimately be accountable for what we craft as the "final product"? How will we activate the knowledge as part of social-change movement building and other crucial change strategies? How will our responses be shaped by our experiences of colonisation, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and class inequalities?

A deep, collective reflection by researchers in the diaspora, as well as those living in or previously exposed to the conditions about which they write would, I believe, have been a compelling addition to this collection. How do they think about and understand their relationship to the problems of war and gender-based violence? For example, how have they experienced, and how are they experiencing, "survivors' guilt" as members of dominant groups in the Global North, Global South, or both? How do they recognise and deal with internalised, probably tacit participation in hierarchical power relations in their geographic locations and in the researcher-research participant relations? How are they affected, perhaps even influenced, by historical, social, cultural, economic, and political relations and realities in their specific locations? Considering these and related questions will enable readers to connect their own relationships to the questions and issues raised in the book more directly.

On a final, technical note, the print font in the physical text is too small even for fully functioning eyes and nearly impossible for anyone with visual challenges.

## Notes

1. Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson delineates the core elements of "research is ceremony": "1. The shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality). The shared aspect of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is accountability to relationships. 2. The shared aspects of relationality and relational accountability can be put into practice through choice of research topic, methods of data collection, form of analysis and presentation of information" (Wilson 2008, 7).

## References

Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

# *How Beautiful We Were* by Imbolo Mbue. New York: Random House, 2021.

**Jane Bennett**

*"I'm very fascinated by the idea that it takes a certain kind of madness to overthrow the status quo and to bring about change. That's why I love that… commercial, 'Here's to the Crazy Ones'"* (Imbolo Mbue, in conversation with Rachel Barenbaum, 2021).

*How Beautiful We Were*, the second novel by Imbolo Mbue, who was born in Cameroon, was published in 2021. Reviewing work written four years ago might seem odd, as reviews usually take place fairly immediately after publication. Indeed, in 2021 and 2022, many reviews celebrated Mbue's "sweeping and quietly devastating novel" (El Akkad 2021). Most of these were Northern (Mbue lives in New York) and the book was heralded in the *New York Times* as one of the 10 best novels of 2021. Writing with some awe, reviewer El Akkad eulogised Mbue's narrative of the resistances through which the fictional village of Kosawa seeks to survive being poisoned, attacked, and wearied into near-death, and then death, by the politics of oil extractivism under the control of Pexton, a United States-based company.

I have struggled, however, to find African-authored discussions of the book. After much searching, I discovered only an essay by Biama, Oketch, and Kimani (2022), and a piece by Benedicta Ehanire (2022). It is more than possible that my searches were too thin or poorly mapped. However, since I encountered – and was shattered by – Mbue's novel in 2021, it has seemed important to do what is possible to bring her writing into the centre of thinking about how to **assert** the catastrophic damage brought on by oil-focussed extractivisms especially, so that the languages used are as indelible as the rights and lives of those who live and work as "collateral damage."

How is it possible to de-normalise, forever, the "productive" flows of oil, minerals, metals, and gas forced from beneath the earth's surface into the industries that resource the strongest technologies of the North? I am referring here to the technologies of high-speed transportation, the giant behemoths of construction and mass-scale food production, and the generation of electrical and, of course, military power. How can knowledge of the intimate, varied, and searing experiences of millions of people, utterly marginalised in the gigantic processes that feed the demand for crude oil, be wrought so that it does not simply become as over-familiar as the dead and dystopian landscapes of oil-soaked earth?

Mbue has her response to these formidable questions: ***How Beautiful We Were.***

For the past year or so, I have been working with Charmaine Pereira and the authors of many of the pieces in this issue of *Feminist Africa* on a research project exploring some contemporary synergies among violence, gender and power. As the collation of writing in this issue suggests, these synergies can be choreographed into a globe of courage, shock, paralysing hopelessness, and the recognition of extraordinary achievements of strategy and solidarities. There is nothing, however, in the issue that focuses on land, questions of loss and ancestry, nor the implications of global extractivist economies. Given the centrality of these questions to what we may understand, in 2025, as "violence," it is an opportune moment to write a review about Mbue's novel, bringing other notes into the issue's exploration.

Before proceeding, however, it is appropriate to pause a little, in hesitation regarding the term "review." Critical sociolinguists Ashraf Abdelhay, Cristine Severo, and Sinfree Makoni have indicated, "reviewing is an act of power and not a mere act of applying shared academic standards of rigor. As such, it has social and political ramifications since it is implicated in the cultural politics of 'naming'" (Abdelhay et al 2021). The authors go on to explore the implications, in Western discourse, of naming the Arab world's revolution in 2010 the "Arab Spring." Effectively, this "Eurocentric invention" entailed "stripping" the peoples of the Arab world of their own history and their agency to name their own revolutionary struggles; it suggests that prior to 2010, countries in North Africa and the Middle East had been in

a "winter slumber." I cite these scholars here because I find helpful their recognition that the work of "review" is indeed political and, almost always, proceeds without the direct consent of an author. One could argue that indirect consent is afforded through the act of publication, but a reviewer gets afforded a somewhat unilateral authority in her choice of approach to, engagement with, and installation of a work she has not herself written. So, what can be suggested as a *feminist* review?

There can be no unitary response to this question. Feminist writers have deployed review practices in many ways: to call out misogynies or gender-blindnesses, to develop a "public" argument with a writer's perspective, to celebrate a writer's achievement, to remind an audience of a piece of work whose visibility has dimmed, and/or to choreograph a mix of commentary into renewing conversations that the author has invited. Perhaps, the simplest demand of a feminist review would be that it remains accountable to questions of how and why a text is chosen for review, and clear about what the review itself requests of any reader. I want to be clear about my intentions. My "review" of Mbue's novel is single-minded: to spur a desire to read *How Beautiful We Were*.

In *How Beautiful We Were*, the epigraph (an item often skipped or glossed over by readers) sets a rhythm, in the manner of a dancer carefully making her first move, which warns of what follows. It is a verse taken from Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned" (9:2 *Jerusalem Bible*). The book of Isaiah, the first of the Major Prophets in the Christian Old Testament, issues a caution against corrupt leadership and the perpetuation of discrimination and violence in interests far from holy. The book's language is at once ferocious – vengeful, infuriated on behalf of holiness, and insistent that change and redirection are possible. The verse selected by Mbue for an entrance into the novel continues: "The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with dressed stone; the fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars… surely wickedness burns like a fire" (Isaiah 9:10–18). The prophecies are believed within Christian theology to speak of environmental and human disasters fuelled by greed, to simultaneously awaken people to the spiritual wrath that this ignites and offer hope: "a light has dawned." While Mbue's novel does invoke the realms of the spiritual, they are not Christian;

rather, what her use of this epigraph signals is the scale of her intention and the presence of ancient languages that insist evil will be seen, named, and vanquished. This is a mind-blowingly ambitious conviction when one considers what the villagers of Kosawa (beginning in 1980) confront over 40 years.

The village has become entangled in the extraction of oil by Pexton, which some villagers initially think may be accessible within the region itself, but which turns out to be American – and inaccessible through anything akin to human communication. The water in Kosawa has become poisoned by the mining technologies, and the natural environment that villagers remember no longer exists: "When the sky began to pour acid and the rivers began to turn green, we should have known that our land would soon be dead" (4). Children fall sick and die, and the novel opens with what will become a pattern of continuous staging: "meeting with Pexton."

Mbue works with a language that could be misconstrued as simplistic. It is true that the cadence of her sentences is gentle, and that she uses no metaphoric embellishment (and very few adjectives) to present a multi-dimensional narrative of very different villagers' perspectives over time. These perspectives encompass what has, and could, or should happen as the deeply unimaginable, and yet materially constant mal-intentions of Pexton become clearer. It is as though Mbue is intensely determined to hold steady her gaze, to "give the facts" as they pertain to many characters' ways of knowing their own lives, hearts, and terrible losses, and how they negotiate with Pexton's indifference to their own survival. "Is the government a rock, a thing with neither brain nor heart?" (41) shouts Malabo, one of six men who set out to confront Pexton. Mbue's writing steps one sure foot after the other across a shattering horizon so that we can proceed alongside the villagers, especially the figure of Thula, who is one of the group of age-mates, "the children". Her story captures the first encounter between Pexton and the village; she becomes "the angry woman" who refuses to accept the company's malevolence in any form and whose strategies for tackling Pexton infuse her whole life.

What the villagers know is that Pexton lies. The visceral fury recalled by "the children" as they begin their story involves how to use language and

what it means to be forced into "discussion" when the power imbalances between the purported interlocutors have rendered words themselves toxic and overrun by a simulacrum of "human communication." This substitute is enacted by those fully and consciously responsible for immense damage to their interlocutors. The manipulation and almost-tangible brutalities of such "discussions" will be familiar to anyone who has lived as powerless, intimately, within the cross-hairs of racist or other systemically violent dynamics. Every fortnight, the villagers are required to meet with "the men from Pexton" in a ritual – held by their own village headman – which performs "participation." The village requests a solution to poisoned waters and thick air; the "men from Pexton" evade, promise possible change, want to leave as quickly as possible. The air itself seems hopeless, paralysed.

In a move which is rehearsed, with increasing complexity, over the course of the novel, Mbue turns the tables. Konga, a man who has always refused to participate in the fortnightly meetings with Pexton, and who is known as "mad", does something extraordinary: he confiscates the key to the car that transported the Pexton-men to Kosawa.

From the deathlike grip of the Pexton-men over the villagers' hearts, a "mad" – and literally visceral – action transforms the meaning of both possibility and story-telling itself: the joy of transforming a space of capture into a place of options is thrilling (if alarming to some villagers). Does Pexton, in fact have a "humanity?" And, if so, can it be genuinely engaged with, captured, removed, forgotten? Are there other stories?

Across the chapters of the novel, one meets betrayal, and connivance, terrible violence meted out to those who protest oil-based capitalism, and implacable courage and joy, all part of the experiences narrated. One encounters the baby brother of Thula, Jabu, who dies and is brought back to life through the spiritual powers of twin brothers dedicated to ancestral cosmologies; Yaya, Thula's grandmother who mourns the disappearance of her son who has gone in search of someone to confront about Pexton's destruction of Kosawa; and Austin, a well-intentioned journalist from the United States who is appalled by what he learns of Kosawa and who believes his advocacy could bring global attention to the situation. Austin and Thula come to understand, however, that "Kosawa is America" – that oil-spillages

and oil-based capital have created havoc on American land as well as in many other zones. So, one is swept into a near-mythical drama of "good" pitted against "evil," but it is clear that for Mbue, and for Kosawa, this is no myth.

*How Beautiful We Were* is dedicated to "*my beautiful, beautiful children*." I cried. But this is hardly the only response that Mbue awaits.

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# Remembering Everjoice Jeketa Win (EJ)

**Dzodzi Tsikata**

On 9 March 2025, a day after International Women's Day, Everjoice Jeketa Win, best known as EJ, became an ancestor, leaving us heartbroken and in deep mourning. EJ, a much-loved comrade, sister and friend to many, nurtured a generation of feminist activists and did so very much in her time with us to advance the feminist causes of African women. This colossal loss could not have come at a worse time for the feminist causes EJ spent her entire professional life defending in national, African and global spaces—at the Women's Action Group, Women in Law and Development in Africa, ActionAid, Association for Women's Rights in Development, the African Feminist Forum and JASS (Just Associates).

As recently as 3 March 2025, EJ's reflections on 30 years of the Beijing Platform for Action were quoted in an article in *The Guardian*. As she said, in typical EJ style: "It is a worrying moment. The question is: are others going to mimic the orange tyrant—I refuse to use his name—by doing what he does or are they going to counter him?"[1] We all know what EJ was gearing up to do.

Everjoice was a consistent, reliable, passionate and principled voice and leader. She wrote beautifully and spoke eloquently in different formats on a range of subjects. These include Western paternalistic assumptions about African women (2007), the dangerous implications of stigma (2020), and violence against women. She did not spare anyone from scrutiny—whether it was well-meaning liberals blind to their own prejudices, tyrants, misogynists or others who pose any form of threat to the emancipation of women. She had no qualms about calling out Aung San Suu Kyi for turning a blind eye to the suffering of the Rohingya refugees, after she paid a harrowing visit to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, where over 900,000 Rohingya had moved to escape persecution by the army in Myanmar. Everjoice was a consequential African feminist voice on X, where she described herself as "Defender of Secular Spaces. Feminist. Sometimes a writer. Sometimes a reader."[2]

*Feminist Africa* was extremely fortunate to have EJ as a leading member of its community. In the journal's years at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, EJ was an active debater on the GWS listserv, a platform famed for cutting-edge discussions on any subject that concerned feminists. One of her contributions to that vibrant epistemic community can be found in the Standpoint section of *Feminist Africa* Issue 3 (2004): National Politricks, as an "Open Letter to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Other Women in the South African Cabinet."

More recently, EJ contributed to *Feminist Africa* Issue 22 (2017): Feminists Organising—Strategy, Voice, Power, edited by Charmaine Pereira. EJ took part in a plenary discussion at the 4th African Feminist Forum in Harare in April 2016, which was published as a conversation on Faith, Feminism and Fundamentalisms.[3] In EJ's opening submission, she criticised the collusion between state and church to re-inscribe and reinstate traditional values that rolled back decades of gains made by women. She also critiqued the prosperity gospel's individualistic message that blamed the poor for structural inequalities, while drawing attention to liberation theology's alternative message of Christian solidarity with the oppressed.

The Feminist Centre for Racial Justice leadership series, a podcast founded and hosted by Awino Okech, has featured EJ in her own words in a four-part conversation.[4] It is comforting to hear EJ in all her clarity, irreverence, wit, and thoughtfulness. More than that, the series represents a veritable soundtrack to African feminist activism spanning some of the most crucial decades of our continent's post-colonial history. It explains EJ's own arc as a feminist, chronicles Zimbabwean, African and global campaigns and struggles, sets records straight and speaks directly to a new generation of African feminists.

EJ brought all her grace, courage and stubborn persistence to her fight against sickness in the last three years. In intermittent WhatsApp messages, she spoke of health challenges, but of much more—of family, friendship, and of returning to the School of Oriental and African Studies as Professor of Practice, a position she had not used much because of the pandemic and ill health. On X, she continued her commentary until the very end on all the things that were wrong with the world.

May EJ rest from the pain of sickness and the suffering that accompanied her last few years, and may she continue to watch over her beloved African feminist movement as she did her whole life.

Hamba Kahle, EJ. You fought the good fight.

## Notes

1. EJ quoted by Isabel Choat in "'We Had All This Energy': The Landmark Gathering of Women That Unnerved the Chinese Government," *The Guardian*, 3 March 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/mar/03/we-had-all-this-energy-the-landmark-gathering-of-women-that-unnerved-the-chinese-government
2. @everjoicewin. X post. https://x.com/everjoicewin?lang=en
3. Theo Sowa facilitated this plenary discussion with Everjoice Win, Fatou Sow and Musimbi Kanyoro.
4. Awino Okech. "Legacy Series with Everjoice Win. Episode 15, Part 1." *Runway to Feminist Justice,* 9 September 2024. Podcast, Spotify, 43 min 27 sec. https://open.spotify.com/episode/6yLGtT0kxIN4GWs34MScnc

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# Contributors

**Annah Ashaba**, also known as Ashanah, is a feminist, human rights activist, writer, teacher, and poet from Uganda. She is currently pursuing a Master of Science (MSc) in Social Justice and Community Action at the University of Edinburgh. She trained as a teacher at Makerere University where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts (BA) with Education (English Language and Literature in English). Ashaba has more than seven years of experience in mobilisation, community engagement, organising, and leadership. She has written poems and articles about the state of affairs in Uganda. As a feminist dissident knowledge creator, she works in multiple genres, including academic writing, journalistic columns, poetry, short stories, social media commentary and activist advocacy writing. Her work intersects civic engagement, governance, student activism, menstrual health advocacy, and women's empowerment.

**Blessing Hodzi** holds a doctorate in Management Sciences (Public Administration) from Durban University of Technology (2025) and a Master's in Peace, Leadership, and Conflict Resolution from Zimbabwe Open University. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on gender-based violence (GBV), traditional leadership, and community-based conflict resolution. She authored a peer-reviewed article on traditional leadership and GBV in Seke (2024) published in the *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, and coauthored a book chapter on cultural ecology and rural agriculture in Zimbabwe. In 2023, she attended a workshop on localising the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda (Leiden University) and presented at the African Studies Association of the UK in 2024. Hodzi's research bridges gender, governance, and grassroots peacebuilding within Zimbabwe's socio-political context.

**Charmaine Pereira** is an independent feminist scholar living and working in Abuja, Nigeria. Her research and writing address the gender and sexual politics of violence, feminist knowledge production, and the politics of natural resource extraction in Africa. Pereira is the author of *Gender in the Making of the Nigerian University System* (James Currey, 2007), editor of *Changing Narratives of*

*Sexuality: Contestations, Compliance and Women's Empowerment* (Zed, 2014), and co-editor of *Jacketed Women: Qualitative Research Methodologies on Sexualities and Gender in Africa* (UCT Press, 2013). She has been an active force in the coalition advocating for the passage of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 in Nigeria and has coordinated research on the implementation of the law. She is one of the Editors of *Feminist Africa*.

**Dzodzi Tsikata** is a feminist scholar activist, Distinguished Research Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and Adjunct Professor at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Her work in the last 30 years has been in the areas of the land and labour relations of agrarian and urban informal economies, Africa's social policy trajectories, and gender and development policies and practices. She is the Principal Investigator of the Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy for Post-COVID-19 Africa Research Project. Tsikata serves as secretary of the Executive Committee of International Development Economics Associates, Managing Editor of *Feminist Africa*, and a member of the editorial collective of *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*. She is a fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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**Jane Bennett** works as an African feminist in universities, non-governmental organisations, and non-profit organisations, as well as an independent activist. Her life focus is on changing systems of injustice, especially in the politics of sexual- and gender-based violence. She is closely affiliated with the African Gender Institute, *Feminist Africa*, and the Breede Centre for Education and Skills.

**Jessie Jabulisile Mdlalose** is the director of Prideful Legends, based in Newcastle, South Africa. Mdlalose has led human rights defence initiatives over many years and is a leading voice in South African LGBTIQ political strategising. She is associated with Queer African Studies and other national and continental LGBTIQ projects.

**Katlego Chibamba** is a podcaster, blogger, human rights activist, and the founder of two LGBTIQ organisations in South Africa. Their website is www.katlegochibamba.org and they have been highly active in many queer-focused initiatives, including funding, creative work, and organising. They currently work within the global programme 'Free to Be Me'.

**Katleho Mahlobo** describes himself as a proud transman and is currently the deputy director of Prideful Legends in Newcastle, South Africa. He is a member of GALA (Gay and Lesbian Archives) in Johannesburg and also works as a business entrepreneur and digital creator.

**Margo Okazawa-Rey**, Professor Emerita, San Francisco State University, is an activist-educator who has been working on issues of militarism for over 30 years. She has long-standing activist commitments in South Korea and

Palestine through Du Re Bang and the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, respectively. She is a founding member of the International Women's Network against Militarism and Women for Genuine Security (United States group). Okazawa-Rey was the most recent board president of the Association for Women's Rights in Development, AWID (2022-2024). She was also a founding member of the US-based Black feminist formation, Combahee River Collective.

**Mpumelelo Zamokuhle Zulu** is an emerging doctoral researcher in the Department of African Feminist Studies and Psychology, where he is based at The Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychology in Africa, University of Cape Town. Zulu is a digital creator and activist, especially in relation to black queer masculinities, ancestral politics and thought/practice, and decolonial writing.

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