

Feminisms that Feed Us: African Feminist Ethics, Everyday Resistance, and the Futures of Development

Janet Husunukpe

Abstract

This paper centres the voices of grassroots women, exploring their role in socioeconomic development through resistance strategies rooted in indigenous knowledge and ethics of reciprocity. Drawing on empirical engagement with grassroots women and activists in Northern Ghana, as well as interviews with feminist scholars, I argue, firstly, that ethics of reciprocity and acknowledgement of local knowledge are central to these women's resistance. Secondly, their resistance practices exemplify how agency is exercised in challenging socioeconomic structures and embody the principles of African feminism and feminist ethics, principles rooted in local context and critically relevant for broader feminist theorising and praxis. Thirdly, their experiences illuminate the tensions between external development frameworks and local resistance practices, highlighting the complexities of grassroots-led socioeconomic transformation. Exploring how women collectively resist alienation entails identifying contextual practices of resistance rooted in shared histories, cultures, and values which African feminisms emphasise. By attending to the material and kinship economies that sustain life, I position grassroots women's organising as a crucial site for reimagining futures. These feminist practices feed us materially and epistemologically – offering visions of survival that exceed the limits of mainstream development thought.

Keywords: African feminisms, Indigenous knowledge, ethics of reciprocity, grassroots women, feminisms

Introduction

Grassroots women are essential to the urban and rural fabric of communities in sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth Africa), through their economic, social, and political engagements and contributions. Despite their critical role (Boserup 1989), they experience socioeconomic alienation. For context, Fordham et al. (2011) define grassroots women as economically, socially, and politically marginalised women from low-income communities. Bagasao (2016) views them as rooted in everyday duties yet systematically excluded from decision-making. I characterise grassroots women as marginalised women at the community level who actively engage in addressing socioeconomic alienation through organising, leadership, and sustained unpaid contributions to development. They use their lived experience, knowledge, and networks to drive change from the ground up. In Ghana, grassroots women comprise working-class women in rural, peri-urban, and low-income urban communities who are excluded from formal power but play vital roles in sustaining local economies, families, and social networks. They face intersecting challenges shaped by gender, geography, and unequal access to resources, and at the same time are active agents of change, organising to secure livelihoods through everyday practices of care, mutual support, and collective actions.

It is precisely within these practices that the discourse of African feminisms and ethics find grounding. African feminisms provide vital frameworks for resisting intersecting oppressions across race, class, sexuality, patriarchy, and global imperialism (Tamale 2020). They affirm values like interdependence, collective well-being, and community preservation (Knowles 2024; Chisale 2018; Wane 2011b). Emerging from lived realities, African feminist ethics emphasise care, agency, intersectionality, and relationality. I admit that, referencing “Africa” broadly risks oversimplification, as Bakare-Yusuf (2003) cautions, due to the continent’s cultural and linguistic diversity. However, this framing is intentional. Tamale (2020) argues that shared histories of slavery, colonialism, and oppression have fostered a common political struggle across African nations. Building on this, I contend that grassroots women in Ghana, like many across the continent, have developed collective strategies in response to systemic oppression and patriarchy. Still, as Bakare-Yusuf (2003) reminds us, we must account for differences shaped by specific

histories and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, understanding how Ghanaian grassroots women resist socioeconomic marginalisation requires attention to practices rooted in their distinct yet interconnected histories, situated knowledge, cultures, and values – principles central to African feminisms.

African feminisms and ethics hold the potential to reshape development in Africa profoundly, yet their influence remains largely underexplored in mainstream development studies. This oversight is particularly concerning given the shortcoming of Western development models, which neglect the needs of impoverished communities. Wane (2011b) argues that externally imposed development approaches often fail to align with local realities. Extending this critique beyond the continent, Roy (2009), Collyer et al. (2019), and Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) highlight how the dominance of Western scientific knowledge as the singular legitimate epistemology marginalises indigenous perspectives, particularly those of women and other marginalised groups. In light of this, the assumption that grassroots women lack theoretical or intellectual insights must be decisively rejected. On the contrary, their lived experiences, situated knowledges, and relational practices constitute vital epistemologies that should inform, shape, and lead development discourses and practices.

Building on this critique of exclusionary knowledge systems, my analysis centres the agency of Ghanaian grassroots women in Northern Ghana working in tandem with activists and positions their resistance as both a challenge to systemic marginalisation and a vital contribution to African feminist ethical debates. Drawing on empirical engagement with grassroots women participating in a Women in Agriculture programme and social enterprise in Northern Ghana, I analyse their economic survival strategies and informal support networks. In doing so, I illuminate that ethics of reciprocity and upholding cultural values that challenge domination and are central to this resistance. To contextualise these grassroots strategies within wider political and ideological frameworks, I examine the role of grassroots activists who navigate aid politics and community development, either engaging with or resisting neoliberal structures. These activists, with ties to grassroots organising, serve as intermediaries between communities and development institutions, negotiating power dynamics. Their experiences highlight the tensions between external development frameworks and local resistance practices, revealing the

complexities of grassroots-led socioeconomic transformation. I also engage with African feminist scholars, whose work challenges dominant Western narratives and provides frameworks for understanding grassroots resistance. Their theorising helps articulate how grassroots women's resistance is shaped by historical and cultural contexts, rather than being subsumed under Western feminist or neoliberal frameworks. This scholarly perspective does not overshadow grassroots voices but, rather, amplifies their strategies within broader intellectual debates and offers a critical lens for rethinking dominant development paradigms.

From this multi-layered analysis, I propose two key dimensions of grassroots resistance: (i) ethics of reciprocity and (ii) upholding cultural values that challenge systemic marginalisation. These insights directly engage with ongoing debates in African feminist ethical theorising, particularly regarding the adequacy of homegrown feminist ethics in addressing contemporary challenges. By centring grassroots women's lived experiences and engaging activists and scholars as interlocutors rather than dominant voices, this paper demonstrates how African feminist ethical frameworks are both contextually grounded and future-oriented. The resistance strategies of these women illustrate how ethics are contextualised within power relations, agency, and collective responsibility. Their actions reveal a fluid interplay between indigenous ethical traditions and adaptive, forward-looking strategies, challenging rigid distinctions between past and future ethical orientations.

African Feminisms and Ethics

African feminisms, as both theoretical and practical frameworks, draw from the continent's indigenous knowledge systems (Bádéjò 1998; Oyèwùmí 2004; Taiwo 2003; Tamale 2020). This knowledge is holistic, non-static, nonlinear, and qualitative. Wane (2011a) emphasises that African feminisms reflect the integrative nature of African indigenous knowledge systems, where spiritual, ethical, and collective dimensions of knowledge-making coexist. Knowles (2024) adds that this integration is essential for understanding the world and offers a necessary critique of colonial, neoliberal, and patriarchal structures that have long influenced knowledge production. As theories, Bakare-Yusuf (2003) emphasises that African feminisms specify and analyse how African women's

lives intersect with a plurality of power formations, historical blockages, and encounters that shape their experiences across time and space. African feminisms reclaim the continent's rich histories, amplify the indigenous values of women, and challenge domination as they relate to patriarchy, class, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and imperialism.

Feminist ethics, as a philosophical inquiry, focuses on moral issues relating to women's everyday lives and experience, especially in relation to nurturing and caregiving (Mangena 2009; Cole and Coultrap-McQuin 1992). Okpokwasili (2024) highlights that feminist ethics emerged to address the limitations of traditional moral frameworks in tackling gender inequality, offering a lens that centres women's voices, experiences, and concerns. In the African context, specifically in Southern Africa, the concept of *Ubuntu* offers an ethical lens that aligns with feminist ethics. Knowles (2024), Chisale (2018), and Tamale (2020) demonstrate how *Ubuntu*, as an African philosophy, is rooted in social and kinship networks and promotes values of care, respect, and compassion. This framework advocates for a collaborative and inclusive approach to knowledge production. Within this philosophy, individuals are defined through their relationships and connections with others and with the earth. This philosophy informs an African feminist ethics, or what Mary Kinyanjui (2019) terms *utu* feminism, that is deeply relational, grounded in care, nurturing, and solidarity. Like African feminisms and ethics, *utu* logic emphasises women's indigenous knowledge, labour, and agency, which challenge dominant state and patriarchal structures and offer an alternative epistemological and ethical order rooted in African feminist thought (Kinyanjui 2019; Dyer 2024).

Globally, care has been central to feminist ethical thinking. Gilligan (1977) identifies caregiving as a moral response often associated with mothering. However, Bakare-Yusuf (2003) and Mbilinyi (1985, 1994) challenge the centrality of "mothering", arguing that it risks essentialising women's roles, excludes the diverse identities of women, and makes feminist ethics vulnerable to co-optation by patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit social reproduction. In the indigenous African contexts, however, mothering is not confined to biological kinship. It is enacted as a collective, interdependent practice involving extended family and the broader community, reflecting a communal ethic of care. For Steady (1987),

motherhood symbolises the generative and life-sustaining force of society, grounded more in spiritual and symbolic significance than in material or economic power. This broader understanding of caregiving resonates with practices in other marginalised communities globally, where shared caregiving and mutual aid serve as vital strategies for survival under structural neglect.

The emphasis on Indigeneity has also provoked critical debates about the boundaries and inclusivity of African feminisms, particularly in relation to class, urbanity, and diasporic identities. Dosekun (2019) challenges the positioning of feminisms within indigenous contexts, arguing that such frameworks can sometimes reinforce anti-elitism and class inequalities. By focusing primarily on rural women in poverty, this approach risks erasing the shared experiences and concerns of women across socioeconomic backgrounds and falsely presumes that urban women in Africa do not experience some form of marginalisation. African feminisms, Dosekun (2019) argues, must resist essentialism and avoid romanticising or dictating notions of Africanness or African womanhood, recognising the multiplicity and complexity of women's experiences across the continent, including the intersections of race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of marginalisation. Despite divergent perspectives, African feminisms and ethics must remain responsive to the specific conditions shaping women's lives. Chisale (2018), Tamale (2020), and Mohammed (2023) stress the importance of contextualising African feminisms. Mohammed (2023) contends that a radical feminist praxis must be intersectional, centring marginalised voices. Focusing on Ghana, Apusigah (2004) notes that women navigate multiple, intersecting forces – cultural, political, religious and geographical – that shape their actions and inactions. Recognising these layered oppressions is essential for dismantling patriarchy. As Hassanain and Sidig (2024) emphasise, differences in ethnicity and class deeply shape feminist organising and homogenising women's struggles under a singular agenda erases local, urgent concerns.

Against the backdrop of African feminism and ethics, I turn to the case of Ghana to examine how grassroots women actively challenge socioeconomic inequalities through everyday practices of resistance. In particular, I highlight how women draw on the ethic of reciprocity, a core value within many indigenous communities and a central tenet of African feminisms and ethics, as a foundation for care-based, collective responses to socioeconomic

exclusion. Centring practices of care as intentional strategies of resistance exemplifies how African feminist ethics can be operationalised to confront socioeconomic alienation.

Grassroots Women in Ghana

The socioeconomic marginalisation of Northern Ghana has deep roots in colonial policies that prioritised the south for cash crop production and wage labour, while designating the north as a labour reserve (Akurang-Parry 2010). This spatial and economic inequality persisted after independence, as successive governments reinforced uneven development. In recent decades, neoliberal policies, marked by privatisation and market-led growth, have deepened regional disparities and gendered exclusions, especially, as Apusigah (2009) notes, for grassroots women whose livelihoods depend on the land. Apusigah (2004) further emphasises that access to resources like capital remain significantly lower for women in Northern Ghana compared to Southern Ghana. This disparity contributes to what Pearce (1978) terms the “feminization of poverty” – a condition shaped by economic and intersecting systems of gender, geography, and systemic neglect.

The feminisation of poverty is especially visible in Northern Ghana, where grassroots women remain central to agricultural production yet are excluded from decision-making and denied access to land and capital (Apusigah 2004, 2009). Apusigah (2004, 2009) emphasises that customary norms restrict women’s inheritance rights, limiting their cultivation largely to non-staple crops such as legumes and vegetables. Adomako Ampofo and Atobrah (2023) add that the colonial shifts towards cash crop economies further marginalised women by privileging men’s agricultural authority and knowledge. In response, many women diversify their livelihoods through handicrafts, wage labour, and dry-season gardening, often supported by NGO food security initiatives. Despite structural barriers, women continue to negotiate space by leveraging male labour on family plots (Apusigah 2009) and organising through kinship, friendships, and informal networks for mutual support (Adomako Ampofo and Atobrah 2023).

The resistance of Ghanaian grassroots women should be understood as part of a long continuum of feminist struggle. From the pre-independence period to the present, women across Ghana have organised against socioeconomic exclusion, drawing on indigenous practices, collective labour, and transgenerational strategies of survival and protest (Awumbila 2001; Manuh 1993; Tsikata 1989; Britwum 2017; Torvikey et al. 2024; Odoi and Baidoo 2024). Torvikey et al. (2024), drawing on a feminist political economy lens, offer a compelling account of grassroots women salt miners along Ghana's southeastern coast. Their collective resistance challenges the encroachment of capital on their livelihoods and community ecologies. Historically, salt production in these coastal communities was governed by communal, ritualised, and gendered systems of exchange, grounded in reciprocity, collective labour, ecological stewardship, and upholding indigenous values. These indigenous values included the prohibition of people from winning salt during certain months until rituals were performed to announce the beginning of the season. However, the imposition of large-scale industrial extraction, driven by state-capital alliances and neoliberal development imperatives, disrupted these systems, dispossessing women of both economic agency and cultural authority. In response, grassroots women mobilised a repertoire of embodied, symbolic, and material forms of resistance across public protests, press conferences, direct occupation of contested mining sites, and threats of naked protest. Notably, the threat of naked protest, a culturally embedded and gendered act of dissent, functions as a repudiation of patriarchal moral orders and an assertion of feminist political agency and insurgency. Such practices challenge patriarchal norms of decorum and exert moral pressure on state and corporate actors.

Beyond physical spaces of protest, Ghanaian women also leverage digital platforms to resist patriarchal norms and reconfigure feminist solidarities. Odoi and Baidoo (2024) highlight how digital activism emerged as a vital terrain for feminist organising around issues of bodily autonomy, identity, and intersecting oppressions linked to gender, class, religion, and tradition. Through digital media, women amplify their voices within national discourse and forge transnational networks of solidarity that transcend localised struggles. Complementing this digital turn, Neely (2017) examines feminist cultural production as another important site of resistance, particularly

within Ghana's creative sectors. Here, women deploy collaborative strategies – such as shared economies, mentorship, and advocacy – to challenge exclusionary norms and cultivate inclusive, feminist spaces. These acts of solidarity expand the terrain of feminist politics beyond formal institutions into creative and cultural domains, demonstrating how grassroots agency is exercised through both material struggle and symbolic production.

Methodology

Building on the theoretical and contextual groundwork laid in the preceding section, I now turn to how grassroots women in Northern Ghana mobilise ethics of reciprocity as a strategy of resistance against socioeconomic alienation. I draw on the work of Apusigah (2009) to inform an analysis that highlights how two categories of grassroots women in Northern Ghana employ ethics of reciprocity as they navigate their livelihood. My first category focuses on grassroots women in farm-based households in a rural community a few kilometres from the region's urban capital, Tamale, while my second category focuses on grassroots women in non-farm-based households in Tamale. In my first case, I engaged in a group discussion with 13 grassroots women farmers with ages ranging from 25 to 52 years. As Apusigah (2009) affirms, grassroots women in farm-based households in Northern Ghana optimise their farming skills by engaging in direct cultivation and playing key roles in NGO-led food security initiatives such as dry season gardening. Similarly, the 13 grassroots women farmers I engaged with are participants in an NGO-sponsored agriculture project. Their limited access to critical resources for production are reflected in their farm production which focuses on non-staples like soyabeans, groundnut, and vegetables. The NGO-sponsored agriculture project, funded through international development streams, offers agricultural training and resources aimed at improving crop yields and economic outcomes for women farmers. Our group discussion centred on ascertaining their experience and agency within their social network and community. Particularly, I engaged them to learn more about the programme: their day-to-day agricultural activities, benefits from the project, the difficulties they experience, and how they navigate said difficulties. This was followed up with one-on-one interviews and home and farm visit observations to gain unbiased opinions from outside of

the group and make visible their individual experiences and values. I elaborate on these in my discussion.

In my second case, I conducted participant observation and engaged in an in-depth interview with the founder of Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, a social enterprise in Tamale. Apusigah (2009) draws our attention to how women in non-farm-based households, unable to undertake crop cultivation, engage in non-farm activities, like trading, handicraft-making, and hiring out their labour, which is necessary to generate income to support their household. Song-Ba Empowerment Centre exemplifies how grassroots women in non-farm-based households resist socioeconomic alienation through ethics of reciprocity. While this analysis draws from the perspective of the founder and my observation of the enterprise, it does not claim to reflect the views of all grassroots women. Rather, it offers a situated example of how African feminist values of care and reciprocity are enacted within one localised initiative.

To further contextualise these practices within feminist and development discourse, I also conducted interviews with four activists in Northern Ghana, all of whom operate at the intersection of grassroots organising and formal development institutions. My interviews with activists centred on how they navigate the politics of and access to aid in our current neoliberal settings. I asked about their community engagement initiatives. Their insights revealed the ongoing tensions between grassroots agency and donor accountability, and the challenges of centring indigenous ethics within models of development. These activists navigate complex spaces of negotiation, where efforts to amplify women voices are often shaped by the conditionalities of international funding, illustrating how grassroots resistance is entangled with global power relations.

Finally, I interviewed two feminist scholars whose works engage deeply with grassroots women's struggles. Their contributions helped frame the data within African feminist theoretical traditions, emphasising the generative capacity of grassroots practices to shape new knowledge formations. My group discussions, interviews, and observations highlight grassroots women's agency within systems of marginalisation and shed light on how African feminist ethics is evolving in response to changing economic and environmental pressures.

With the exception of Rhoda, the founder of Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, all names are pseudonyms.

As a feminist researcher, acknowledging and reflecting on my positionality is integral to both the research process and my interaction with participants. Positionality is not fixed but fluid and contextual (Folkes 2022; Reyes 2020), requiring continuous reflection on power dynamics, privilege, and shared or divergent experiences. Throughout this study, I navigated the complexities of being both an insider and an outsider, recognising how my background, identity, and academic training influenced my engagement with different participant groups. My positionality was shaped by several factors: I am a young, cisgender Ghanaian woman with a Western-influenced education, raised in Northern Ghana in a household considered middle-class by local standards. In my interviews with feminist scholars and activists, my national identity, educational background, and shared experiences as a somewhat Western-trained Ghanaian woman facilitated rapport. However, during focus group discussions with grassroots women from rural Northern Ghana, my sense of insider status was quickly challenged. While I shared a regional and national identity with them, my academic privilege and middle-class background set me apart. This encounter emphasised the role of intersectionality in shaping research relationships and the need to engage critically with the complexities of insider/outsider dynamics. I remained attuned to power imbalances and actively worked to create spaces where grassroots women felt comfortable to share their experiences on their own terms. For example, during group discussions with grassroots women farmers, I stepped back from leading the discussion and allowed a respected woman leader and peer to co-facilitate in the local language.

Ethics of Reciprocity

I structure this section around two interconnected sub-sections. The first sub-section under the theme “kinship-based economies” focuses on my engagement with grassroots women farmers in the Women in Agriculture programme, highlighting their success stories, challenges, and the centrality of nurturing and kinship ties in overcoming challenges. Under this sub-section, I illustrate how family support systems play a crucial role in women’s

socioeconomic advancements, shaping their ability to navigate structural inequalities. The second sub-section, under the theme “collective care and mutual support networks” focuses on the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, highlighting solidarity and mutual support in its day-to-day operation. I also bring in the voices of activists, examining their role in fostering socioeconomic advancement. This section explores how both grassroots women and activists navigate neoliberal development frameworks while drawing upon indigenous values and solidarity-based practices.

Kinship-based economies

The Women in Agriculture project reflects Oppong and Abu’s (1987) *Seven Roles of Women* as participants navigate multiple roles – mother, partner, farmer, kin, and community member – often simultaneously. They blur the line between productive and reproductive labour, linking caregiving, economic work, and collective well-being. For instance, during the group discussion, the women cited family cohesion and meeting their children’s needs as key motivations, while relying on extended family’s support during farming challenges. Fatima, a middle-aged grassroots farmer, expressed the following:

I planted rice and when I harvest it, I sold some to buy soap and water to wash their [her children’s] clothes. Every morning, I cook the rice for my children to go to school and when they return, they eat the leftover. I also use some of the money from the sold rice to give to my children for school and take care of the house.

Amina, also middle-aged, added:

I planted groundnut and though I did not get [harvest] as much as I expected because of the rain, I was able to sell some and used the money to buy school uniform and other school supplies for my children. I hope to harvest more next year so I can buy bicycles for my children to go to school because the school is quite far.

The concept of family extends beyond the nuclear unit to include broader kin networks, reinforcing collectivist approaches to caregiving and economic responsibility. Participants often cared for children of deceased relatives, highlighting the presence of kinship-based care in their socioeconomic

practices, wherein obligations to extended family are integral to household and community survival.

Similarly in a playful moment, a participant, who had grown fond of me, joked about encouraging her husband to marry me so I could become her “sister wife”. While light-hearted, the comment revealed how women actively navigate marriage and kinship ties in everyday socioeconomic interactions. Still, it is crucial to avoid romanticising polygamous arrangements, as lived experiences within polygamous households vary significantly. Regardless of marital structure, broader family dynamics highlight the centrality of reciprocal support, as women both provide for and receive help from extended kin. This case parallels Clark’s (1999) analysis of Asante women. She notes the figure of the good, self-sacrificing Asante mother, who works outside the home to feed her children, reflecting the dominant bond of motherhood in everyday life. Like the Asante women Clark reflects on, the ability of the women farmers to sustain their families through agricultural livelihoods emphasises the intersection of gender, labour, and care work, and reaffirms the broader significance of kinship-based social and economic resilience within grassroots communities.

While we acknowledge the intersection of gender, labour, and caregiving as vital for socioeconomic development, it is necessary to mention that the neoliberal states often co-opt these roles to mask structural neglect of marginalised communities. Taking the Women in Agriculture project as a case in point, women are positioned as key agents of development, yet the state withdraws from providing basic infrastructure or childcare support leaving women to fill the gaps. This phenomenon has been documented by Miraftab and Huq (2024) who note that marginalised women are often coerced into invisible and unpaid labour, under the guise of “good mothering”, compensating for state withdrawal from social welfare. Tsikata (1995) also shows how the Structural Adjustment Programmes’ policies in Ghana depend on the unpaid labour of women to compensate for the absent social state. Mbilinyi (1985, 1994) further argues that patriarchal ideology compels women to shoulder household and family responsibility from their cash earnings under the construction of “motherhood” and “wifehood”. While these critiques highlight the co-optation of caregiving, grassroots women’s strong sense of collective belonging and communal values remain central to their actions, revealing the complexities of resistance.

Collective care and mutual support networks

Drawing on Rhoda's insights, I further illuminate how care, mutual support, and social networks are woven into the daily functioning of the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre's enterprise, revealing care as a vital strategy of resistance and collective survival among grassroots women from non-farm households. Originally established as an NGO, the centre trained its first group of young grassroots women and mothers in shea butter production, reusable sanitary pad making, and fabric weaving, aiming to promote sustainable livelihoods. Alongside skills development, trainees received education in business management, loan access, and digital marketing. They earned income during training, with the aim of becoming self-sufficient within six months to a year. To support future ventures, trainees were encouraged to save or reinvest part of their earnings from product sales to build seed capital.

Although the organisation began with the goal of training grassroots women to start their own businesses, it has evolved into a social enterprise. Past trainees now serve as business partners, recruiting new trainees and offering the same skills training and business education. The enterprise operates on the principle that business partners (past trainees) purchase raw materials for production, and finished goods are sold in an established showroom. Once trainees acquire the necessary skills, they become members or business partners. As of 2022, 19 graduates have established independent businesses and begun training others. At that time, the centre had 47 trainees, 42 in fabric weaving and five in shea butter production. Members actively recruit others from their networks, reflecting a community-centred approach that rejects neoliberal individualism. Past trainees support newcomers by sharing knowledge, resources, and opportunities. These practices exemplify what Knowles (2024) and Chisale (2018) identify as caregiving and communal knowledge-making central to moral and social life – an approach grounded in the values of Ubuntu. The centre reflects these values through community-building efforts that emphasise mentorship, skill-sharing, and knowledge transmission, merging ethics of reciprocity with strategies for social transformation. Rather than passively receiving aid, these women emerge as critical agents, using collective action and mutual support to confront systemic marginalisation. Their practices reinforce that resistance extends beyond overt

political mobilisation, manifesting in everyday acts of care, solidarity, and communal upliftment.

Extending this discussion, the activists I engaged with also highlighted mutual support, care, and social networks as central to grassroots activism. They noted that financial and material resources often stem not just from international donors but from personal funds, social networks, and collaborative efforts within coalitions. An activist described activism as a form of ministry, dedicating her life to supporting women and girls despite having her own career to pursue. Others spoke of personal sacrifices, often relying on their savings and networks to sustain initiatives.

We have organised four campaigns so far, and we raised the donations from family and friends. I have not really received donation or funding from any organisation or like international organisations, because I personally wanted to do this on my own. I mostly rely on volunteers and friends and we work full time, so it is sacrificial. Most of my team members are women, so we brainstorm and discuss how to support these girls. – (Activist one, Sanitary Pads for Girls Project).

It [activism] came [to me] because of an inherent passion and my financial difficulty growing up. I experienced what it felt like to be disadvantaged. Most of the women I work with also happened to be my mom's friends, but unfortunately, my mom has passed away now, but the women are like mothers to me. The programmes are now not limited to women alone; it includes other people in the communities. – (Activist two, founder of Women in Agriculture, non-profit project).

The pooling of human and material resources reflects values of reciprocity and care. While grassroots women enact these values in their everyday lives, the activists interviewed expand them into organised movements. Investment in the well-being of others encapsulates African feminist values, where care and mutual support are fundamental. Activists' experiences with inequality, particularly under oppressive systems, motivate their work, reinforcing African feminisms' focus on collective struggles through personal and community action.

Upholding Indigenous Practices and Cultural Values

Like ethics of reciprocity, indigenous practices and cultural values remain vital resources through which grassroots women navigate socioeconomic challenges. Here, I draw on discussions with grassroots women farmers alongside insights from African feminist scholars to highlight the significance of amplifying indigenous practices. The first sub-section examines how grassroots women manage agricultural projects using local knowledge and collective practices, resulting in more sustainable outcomes. The subsequent sub-section engages with feminist scholars whose work provides a foundation for understanding grassroots resistance. They articulate how women's strategies emerge from historical and cultural frameworks that challenge and extend beyond Western feminist and neoliberal paradigms.

My discussion with the farmers showed that when grassroots women actively manage their own farmlands, the results are more sustainable. The Women in Agriculture project supports this by working directly with women on their own farms, providing training and inputs to improve yields. This contrasts with earlier NGO-led projects that were run on centralised farms and excluded women from key decisions. As Hamdia puts it:

Some people came five years ago and set up a farm by the dam. They came and introduced tomatoes, jute leaves, and okra. It was like a teaching programme: they showed us how to do the planting on that farm and when we harvested, we were given the harvested vegetables to cook. We did not plant on our farms or do the planting ourselves. But in this new programme [Women in Agriculture], we plant on our own family lands, and we have an agriculture extension officer who assists in getting rid of pest and our husbands and the older people in our family help us to farm from time to time. You know they have been farming for years, and they also know the land very well. When they see some mistakes, they come and correct it.

This shows a shift towards centring women's autonomy and their connection to their own land. By encouraging farming on ancestral lands, sharing knowledge through kinship networks, and using traditional practices passed down through generations, the current project better aligns with sociocultural dynamics. However, this approach may still reflect elements of a top-down model. While women farm on their own land and exercise some autonomy, their dependence on NGO-provided inputs and funded training suggests a

continued influence of externally driven projects. NGOs, as Miraftab (1997), Tvedt (1998), Elyachar (2002), and Pieterse (2001) argue, often function within neoliberal frameworks that seek to mitigate, rather than transform, the very social problems neoliberalism produces. NGO partnerships may remain crisis-focused, addressing immediate needs while leaving broader structural inequalities intact (Mohan and Stokke 2000; de Wit and Berner 2009). This reliance raises questions about how grassroots resistance may remain entangled within the paradigms it aims to disrupt. Perhaps, Eddouda's (2024) study of local women farmers in Morocco reflects similar complexities of resistance in relation to land reforms as women farmers exhibit values and norms that disrupt feminist resistance. For Apusigah (2004), women's everyday experiences are shaped by culture as well as wider social, political, religious, economic, and even geographical forces. Their lives unfold within contested spaces of negotiation and struggle.

Amplifying Narratives of Indigenous Practices

During an outreach project, the person [an elitist activist working with the women's group] said to the women, "If you women agree with me, we are going to work towards scrapping bride wealth." But the women in the community said, "It would be very difficult for us to achieve that; my bride price was paid, same as my mother, so how can my daughter marry for free? They will not respect her." Then the activist turned to me and said, "They insist we have to continue to have bride wealth, unfortunately, we are working with these people who cannot think beyond their noses." I was livid. – (Activist three, member of larger network).

Amplifying narratives of indigenous practices remains central to grassroots resistance, as it challenges dominant discourses that marginalise non-Western knowledge systems and foster ethical frameworks grounded in lived experience. For instance, the notions of bride wealth and sanitary products illustrate tensions with Western narratives dismissing traditional practices as regressive, reinforcing a binary between the past and a presumed progressive future. The feminist scholars and activists highlight how reusable sanitary cloths, historically used across communities, have been pejoratively labelled as "rags" in Western discourse. This framing reflects Eurocentric epistemologies that delegitimise indigenous knowledge while promoting dependence on

commercial products, thus commodifying basic needs and reproducing global inequalities. The endurance of such narratives, sometimes echoed by local actors, complicates grassroots resistance. As the above quote shows, even some African activists inadvertently reproduce these framings, revealing how internalised Western discourses generate tensions within feminist activism itself.

Rather than simply signifying ownership of women, bride wealth restructures kinship ties and claims to children within marriage. This also reflects a broader reality in some communities in Northern Ghanaian communities, where a woman's identity is not confined to wifhood but shifts across multiple, fluid social positions shaped by relational and contextual dynamics. A woman simultaneously performs both male and female roles, depending on her relationship to others. For instance, the Western distinctions of "uncle" and "aunt" do not apply neatly here. Maternal aunts are considered mothers and take on maternal responsibilities towards their nieces and nephews, while paternal aunts are regarded as fathers and fulfil paternal roles. These kinship configurations demonstrate a relational understanding of identity, care, and familial obligation rooted in indigenous ontologies. Moving beyond the singular concept of wifhood, women embrace a fluid and context-dependent understanding of their roles within the extended household. The diverse identities within certain communities indicate the flexibility and adaptability of African feminist ethics.

Similarly, the kitchen, within indigenous feminist practice, is not merely a domestic space but a site of power and agency for women (Ekejiuba 1995). In many African societies, women control food storage and distribution, with the kitchen and granary serving as key domains of authority. Taiwo (2003) critiques Western feminist theories for sensationalising African women's experiences while failing to account for the nuanced political economies in which they act. Practices such as food distribution and household governance are not evidence of disempowerment but rather expressions of a relational feminist ethic that prioritises care over consumption and collectivism over individualism. The kitchen, often rendered as a site of female oppression, functions within many African societies as a key space of resource control, decision-making, long-term planning, and intergenerational knowledge

transfer. Here, power is not enacted through formal institutions but through embedded ethical negotiations.

Amplifying these practices emphasises the agency of grassroots women, illustrating how their strategies of resistance are part of an evolving, context-driven praxis. Practices such as the use of reusable sanitary cloths, often derided as unsanitary or regressive, are amplified within African feminist praxis as acts of sustainable, anti-capitalist resistance. These cloths are not merely relics of the past; they signify self-reliant, future-oriented strategies that resist the commodification of menstruation and the imposition of unsustainable and extractive global supply chains.

Taken together, these practices constitute a dynamic, indigenous epistemology – fluid, collective, and oriented toward survival and transformation. They articulate their own visions of progress, ones that redefine the ethical foundations of economic autonomy and environmental sustainability. Their amplification creates new ethical paradigms that bridge past wisdom with future possibilities. This ongoing negotiation between tradition and transformation is key to reshaping how we understand empowerment, resistance, and development.

Conclusion

The resistance strategies of grassroots women in Ghana illustrate African feminisms and ethics as a lived practice that counters socioeconomic exclusion. While African feminism, as both ideology and movement, reclaims the continent's rich histories and asserts the value of women's knowledge in challenging patriarchal, racial, sexual, and class-based forms of domination, African feminist ethics, as a philosophical approach, centres care, agency, intersectionality, and relationality as frameworks for resistance. The actions of grassroots women farmers, women of the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, and activists challenge Western development models by drawing on shared knowledge that resists marginalisation, reaffirming shared agency, or fostering collective care. These ethics of reciprocity are not abstract; they are mobilised through grassroots action, such as women supporting each other through savings networks and mentorship. In production, reproduction, and care work,

women mobilise inherited wisdom. For example, women farmers draw on knowledge from spouses and elders within their kinship networks to guide their farming activities. In contrast, women in Song-Ba Empowerment Centre's social enterprise adapt to changing urban realities by sharing skills in digital marketing and strategies for accessing loans. Across these spaces, they build networks of mutual support that connect traditional wisdom with new opportunities, linking experiences to future survival and growth and reflecting a dynamic interplay between inherited wisdom and adaptive, forward-looking strategies. These lived realities and practices demonstrate that African feminist ethics are dynamic, context-responsive, deeply rooted in everyday struggles, and negotiated in response to current material conditions, offering a rich site for theorising lived, adaptive forms of resistance. Their agency must therefore be recognised both as a force that safeguards values and knowledge, and as a foundation for building futures rooted in justice, collective care, and inclusive models of development.

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