

From the Feminist Charter to Beyoncé and Radical Optimism: Reflections of Younger African Feminists

Jackline Kemigisa moderates an online conversation between young(er) African feminists.

Jackline Kemigisa (JK): Let's begin with brief self-introductions; as you introduce yourselves, please tell us what it is that you do to pay your bills, what brings you joy and where you belong in the various variations of feminisms. I am a Ugandan feminist who identifies as abolitionist leaning.

Brenda Wambui (BW): Hi everyone. I'm a Kenyan feminist who came to feminism through a radical lens, though I have moved beyond prioritising the sub-divisions, mostly because I'm caught up in the weeds of praxis and work. It's about everyone falling in line, picking up their *jembes* (hoes) and doing the hard work. I am a policy, research and advocacy professional working across Africa and beyond. I am building Ushiriki Labs, a policy lab that champions frontier issues, aimed at ensuring that the Global South shapes the 21st Century agenda, moving beyond providing labour and raw materials. The African continent is currently relegated to issues such as tuberculosis, malaria and food insecurity. What brings me joy is the awakened political consciousness among Kenyan youth. I used to say, "If Kenyan people protested like the French, we would..." I used to think it was impossible, but last year Kenyans shocked me, almost to death, and gave me back my sense of optimism. I now have a level of optimism that is, quite frankly, delusional.

JK: Okay, thank you so much. Mira...

Mira Agouzoul (MA): Actually, that's my nickname. My legal name is Naima, but everyone calls me Mira, which is an Amazigh name. The Amazigh people are the indigenous people of North Africa and I've always wanted to have an Amazigh name, but back in the day, doing so was forbidden by law; how crazy is that? I am a 28-year-old Moroccan intersectional feminist, though I don't focus on labels. Feminism is, by definition, the pursuit of equality between men

and women, of equal rights and opportunities, regardless of what variation you subscribe to. I'm also an artist and a student. A few years ago, I was at what you'd call "rock bottom" – out of school with no stable job and struggling with mental health issues. Everything changed in 2022 when I received treatment and healed. Then I decided to turn my life around and went back to school. I've always known that I was a feminist but never an activist, preferring to keep my ideas to myself. I decided to change that and entered feminist organisations and youth spaces, and little by little, I started growing. Now, I'm in my final year of a Bachelor of Civil Engineering degree programme and a freelance customer support worker online. I also relate to Brenda's delusional optimism because I have become so optimistic my friends are tired of it.

JK: Okay, we love "delusional optimism"; It seems this is becoming a theme, and we might use it as a politic when we start dreaming about what the feminist Charter and AFF can look like in the next 20 years. Larissa, over to you...

Larissa Kojoué (LK): Hello everyone. I'm happy to be part of this conversation. I am from Cameroon and I have a daughter who's four and a half. She's bringing me so much joy; this morning, before she left for school, we danced together. That's the thing that brings me joy. What pays my bills? I'm a researcher with Human Rights Watch. I used to teach at a university in Cameroon but had to leave for security reasons; the situation in Cameroon is very depressing. Will we see the light one day? And I admire the Kenyan GenZs for going on the streets and standing up for what is right. I'm looking forward to seeing Cameroonians do the same. We're at a turning point in our history in Cameroon. As you know, we have a president who has decided that he loves the country so much, he'll die in power! I'm part of the civil society in Cameroon where we're trying to organise but feel so powerless. I wouldn't say that I'm a delusional optimist, but I've always been an optimist. On the feminist spectrum I'm an African feminist; it's as simple as that. I stand for women, the powerless, dignity and justice. Wherever there are people in chains, I'll be there to say, "No!" My decolonial first name is Afua [an Akan name], which means a girl born on a Friday.

JK: Thank you. And now we're going to move to Wunpini.

Wunpini Mohammed (WM): I'm so excited to be part of this conversation. I'm just a feminist... used to be a radical feminist but I haven't used or thought

about this label lately. I'm an Assistant Professor at Cornell University. What brings me joy is that my book is coming out and it was endorsed by *The Sylvia Tamale*.

JK: Thank you, Wunpini. Over to you, Liyema.

Liyema Somnono (LS): So lovely meeting all these ladies; you're all doing exceptional work. I'm from South Africa and a passionate advocate of sex worker rights with a side job in sex work. I advocate for equitable health rights for women in all their diversity. I think I'm a radical feminist; somebody once asked me, "What radicalised you?" I remember the first time I had to stand up for something... I was at the university, and I couldn't help noticing friends who could not afford education, so I was part of the Fees Must Fall movement at Nelson Mandela University. What brings me joy is a positive development in the fight for decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa: recently, the NDPP – National Director of Public Prosecution – has decided to put a halt to prosecutions against sex workers. We currently have a strategic litigation case and that's a big win because we've never seen the NDPP take such a decision before regarding sex workers.

JK: We love that. I've always been cynical of feminist organising and my politic is largely rooted in a very specific Afro-pessimistic view of all institutions. But today I'll wear the hat of delusional optimism; I'm going to tap into that. Now, let's jump into the Charter: how does it influence your work? I'll start with Larissa.

LK: I came across the Charter in 2016. Although I had been a feminist for some time, I didn't know much about it before then because I didn't appear much in organising spaces. So, I came across it in a regional queer movement network gathering in Cotonou. That same year, I was at the AWID forum in Brazil where they had hard copies of the African Feminist Charter. I was so happy, I thought, "Oh, so we have this as African women; we even have a document, a Charter that represents us!" I was so excited, more so because for the first time, I could see a Pan-African document that mentioned sexual orientation and gender identity. Something else I liked about it was the declaration: "Our feminist identity is not qualified with 'Ifs', 'Buts', or 'Howevers'." Yay, I really, really love it for that.

And from then on, the things that I was doing without thinking that I was applying feminist principles became clear. The Charter helped me articulate better my way of working. It informed the way I connected, for example, with other queer organisations when I worked in West and Central Africa and even with the Coalition of African Lesbians two years later. The Charter was our foundational document, so I used it a lot when connecting with queer organisations because we were prioritising women-led groups. I have kept it now as a researcher feminist and scholar. I use it very intentionally, and even in my daily practice or while watching a movie, going shopping or doing any simple thing, I ask questions: “Who’s the head of the organisation I’m visiting? Is it a woman? Is it an African woman?” Things like that. Even as a consultant for NGOs in and outside Africa, I always make sure that I apply African feminist principles such as being open to listen to the people with the least power, being accountable and not taking advantage of my power, privilege and interests. I’m always questioning whether what I’m doing corresponds to the needs of the people that I work with.

So yes, the Charter has helped me shape and better my way of working as an African feminist. You know when you mention that you’re a feminist, people look at you in a certain way. I didn’t mind that back then, but now I have something that I can point to and say, “Go and check this out.” We have this, it exists and it represents all of us. The African Feminist Forum is a much-needed space and that Charter has really been foundational for me and for many other queer organisers. And I have to say that in Central and West Africa they didn’t know about it, but we’ve tried to make it accessible in the last ten years so that it can be a regular, systematic reference document. We are getting there.

JK: Thank you, Laressa. I’m going to pick on a thread you mentioned: The Charter’s “No ifs, no buts...” and look at Wunpini here... you have written in your scholarly work how the F-word (F being Feminist) is frowned upon within the media and in regular society. But when we see how Chimamanda and Beyoncé have somehow popularised it, it has become like some liberal pop culture: every artiste now has a feminist status suit. So, holding on to those two contradictions, tell us how the Charter influences your work as a scholar and the current reality in West Africa.

WM: Thank you very much, Jacky. I have to be honest about how I feel about the Charter. I place the very notion of a Charter within the context of institutionalised feminisms, and I have struggled against institutionalised feminisms in my scholarship. I'm a professor at an Ivy League University, and I don't know what a Charter is! But when I read the Charter, I noticed that there are a lot of things in there that I had been using and other feminists have been using. So, I think that we need to move away from institutionalised language that often borders on legalese and puts everyday people off – the way that feminism is constructed.

I grew up in Ghana where institutionalised feminisms have always been exclusionary of people like me – my class background, ethnicity, religion, geographical location. So, often I've done work outside of these spaces. And often I've tended to perceive institutionalised feminists and gender advocacy spaces as an upper-class Ghanaian women's club. So, when I hear about a Charter, that's what I'm thinking about; that's why I'm resistant to that kind of language. When I was reading, I thought, "This is excellent, but why do we call it a Charter?" Maybe there are reasons for that.

Regarding conversations about the construction of African feminisms around womanhood and what it means (I hope we'll talk about that later), I have suggestions for reframing it in ways that do not exclude people already pushed to the peripheries in our communities. I also want to be honest that even though I haven't necessarily engaged with this Charter, I've used some of its ideas in my theory and praxis. For example, I noticed the articulation of intersectionality, although that term was not specifically used. I also like the notion of "No ifs, no buts" because that also connects with the intersectional framework and that's why I'm resistant to using specific institutionalised feminist jargon to describe feminist organising work or theorising.

I want to give credit to the Charter and the work that these amazing people have done in the last twenty years to normalise feminist discourses in mainstream spaces... I'm thinking of people like the Chimamandas and the Taylor Swifts because they had to build the foundation for these conversations. So, I'm not dismissing the notion of a Charter, but just problematising the use of that jargon that can make people feel that they are not part of these spaces. I think it has normalised other mainstream discourses in the public sphere,

including the digital. In addition, the Charter has provided foundations for younger people new to feminism to build their praxis, even if they don't know that that's what they are doing. It has also pushed civil society organisations beyond operating within gender advocacy frames. Just this morning, before this call, I was looking at the proofs of a paper and thinking about gender advocacy organisations that were using words such as "feminist." I don't think that 20 years ago, they'd have used the F-word in those contexts. So, again, I want to say that I'm not dismissing the Charter; I think that there is very important work in there and I will absolutely cite it in some of the work that I'm doing, but we need to articulate these issues in ways that are intelligible to Africans who are not in institutionalised feminist spaces.

It goes back to my interest in what feminism looks like within the African space. What does indigenous African feminism look like? I think some of the issues with mainstream feminism concern the emptying of feminism of its radical essence that Chimamanda, Beyoncé and Taylor Swift have demonstrated. For example, just this past week Nigerian feminists online made remarks such as, "I am a feminist, but I think that the patriarchy is good!" And I asked, what do you mean by that? You know that words actually mean things. So, it's a double-edged sword; we're getting more people learning about radical feminist politics, but that also means that we're losing out on the fundamentals of what feminism is.

JK: Thank you so much, Wunpini. I like that even in your critique of the Charter you tap on the need to problematise its language. We'll come back to the gaps later and look at things that have been swept under the rug. We'll talk about what it means to revive a Charter when the NGO industrial complex is dying... how do we resuscitate that? What role do the grassroots play? But Liyema, have you used the Charter in your work, and secondly, how do you see it playing out within sex work organising in Southern Africa?

LS: I identify this Charter as a tool that could inform some of the advocacy work that affects different women. Personally, I find nothing new in the Charter; it captures what we have always implemented about feminism through the work that we do. But as a person reading this Charter and unpacking it within the sex worker movement, I identify with the things that are being talked about; these are my experiences. So, when you talk about the importance of

bodily autonomy, dignity, labour, resisting the patriarchal institutions... these are all beautiful things that I picked up in the Charter, but I did feel that as much as I align with it, there's an omission; there's no voice of sex workers within the Charter. Not explicitly naming us also tells a different story; our stories and experiences as women are multifaceted and, as much as they are interlinked, we have different identities.

So, I hope that as we begin to review the Charter, we will talk about language, because if we don't name people/communities we will end up being ambiguous with our advocacy. We don't want that; we want to be more direct. We're 20 years in, celebrating this huge milestone, and it gives us an opportunity to fill those silences. So yeah, let's be more vocal about the marginalised communities within the Charter; let's not make it too broad.

JK: Thank you. I really like the idea of being specific and addressing the silences in both the Charter and feminist organising as we dream of the next 20 years. Mira, you told us about your journey as a young feminist and I'm curious: have you used the Charter in any of the youth work that you do?

MA: Thank you. Actually, I must be honest that I had not come across the Charter before; I'm quite embarrassed about that, but the feminist who invited me to join this roundtable sent me a copy. So, when I read it I was instantly interested. I thought, "This is amazing and I want to be part of it." I have re-read it to understand more deeply the concepts and everything that it represents, and I have to agree that there are so many things that could be evolved because we live in a time full of progress and evolution, especially with technology and the digital world.

I'll start with the things that I valued in the Charter. The definition of African feminists as women who call themselves feminists, "No ifs, no buts" is really important and I relate to that. African feminists come from different backgrounds, cultures, social classes and identities, and we share the same commitment, which is to dismantle patriarchy and to acknowledge it as a system (as opposed to individuals) that controls all aspects of our lives. So, I think for the Charter to acknowledge that is very important. I also think it's important to define what African feminists stand for because we have to fight not only patriarchy but also all the other systems that are linked to it, such as racism, colonialism and capitalism. It's important to acknowledge African

history and its contribution, especially women's contribution in fighting patriarchy on the continent.

JK: Thank you so much, Mira. Brenda, I want to bring you in. Mira made a really good point about the use of technology, and the point that keeps coming up is the idea of translation, access and language, and how all those things are interlinked. You've done a lot of work around digital-feminisms and thinking about African feminisms and technology. In that specific realm of your work, how have you activated the Charter and what values have you used for your work?

BW: Thank you very much. Let me start with a funny story about how I came to feminism. I used to be one of those infinitely bored students in high school – and Kenyan high schools can be painfully boring, especially boarding schools – so I used to read the dictionary for fun! I came across the word, “Feminist,” liked it, and decided I was one! I was fifteen years old.

At the time the Charter was being crafted in November 2006, I was wrapping up my high school exams. Then I went online in 2007 and joined Facebook after lying about my age. For me, that was the introduction to the wider social sphere, so I came of age on the Internet, not just as a Kenyan but as a global citizen. I had many thoughts, which I posted all over Facebook; I discovered Twitter, started a blog, and over time I grew into my identity as a feminist. People realised that I was talking a lot about the oppression of women; my heart and my head were in the right place. A group of Kenyan feminists at the time – because we were like an endangered species – had a separate closed platform where we could speak. I was at university at the time, in 2010, and a couple of them who had noticed what I was saying asked me whether I'd be interested in joining the group. I was ecstatic and I said yes. So, I joined and then someone offhandedly mentioned the Charter. I didn't know that there was such a document. I was 20 years old with a lot of time on my hands so I looked for the Charter.

I read the Charter, and for me it was mind-blowing that a group of women had come together and defined something that was nebulous to me at the time. I had very strong feelings about certain things, and to see them put into words was really important. Therefore, for me the evolution not just of a document or a group of women, but of a politic. Maybe this is a function of

age, but despite any shortcomings, looking back I am quite charitable towards the document and the people who drafted it at that time, especially considering that this is the equivalent of having to painstakingly go up a mountain, survive the drop in oxygen and the nasty temperatures, stake a flag and claim the space. So, it's easy for us or for me – let me speak for myself – to say that of course the document could have been more radical, but at that time, this was a very radical act. Let's give credit where it is due.

Yes, there's a lot that is missing; it could be more political and I think that's the next step: to use this Charter as a tool or as a stepping stone for inter-generational conversation. We are very fortunate – most of the drafters, if not all, are still alive, right? – to be able to have that conversation as people of the next generation of a constantly evolving political process. Now, it's no longer controversial to call yourself a feminist. Had you told me that in 2010, I would have died of laughter; this was one of the worst things you could call yourself. That Beyoncé, one of the most popular global figures, can use the term means that we have an opportunity to politicise it even more. So, we accept that we have won some space and mainstreamed some ideas that were taboo. To bring in a perspective, for example, that Liyema has mentioned, where's the voice of sex workers? At the time that this Charter was being written, and even now, we know that many feminists were averse to sex work. This sentiment still exists, but especially back then it was a very, very controversial idea. I have been to a couple of feminist gatherings where some participants declined to engage in conversation with sex workers. So, this is new ground that we have to stake. We also have to stake conversations around sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity. Just as the Charter is silent on sex workers, it does not explicitly mention LGBTQ persons.

Then there's the class aspect. It was a very specific type of woman who could take part in women's rights advocacy on the continent at that time. To be able to claim this as a position was to say specific things about your class, right? So, now we have to widen that to include and centre grassroots feminists and their "rough edges," for example – because these are things that people will say when they think it's safe to do so. Or the positions that – and I've heard this from Kenyan feminist organising spaces – one should have the humility to be quiet and listen to others: for me it's quite important to know when to do so, recognising that at the time that I came to my identity as a feminist, I was a

younger, upcoming professional, and now my class identity has evolved. I also need to be able to tell that where I might have been part of a minority at some point, right now, by virtue of my position, if I move without awareness, I might be occupying more space than is necessary. So, knowing when to cede that space is an exercise in humility.

I'd like to come back to something that Wunpini said that was amazing. What do we owe each other? As an ideological movement that has no borders, what does it mean for some of our sisters or siblings to tell us not to be in their business when there is a clear lapse in politics? We claim certain things as feminists, and when we're "caught falling short," in as much as it hurts – and it does – we should be called out. I'm referring to the Nigerian Feminist Movement which has been under the spotlight on the internet for the past week. And the defensiveness... I understand where it's coming from, but then we have a shared responsibility to each other. So, that's another conversation that we really need to have. I feel that our feminist predecessors or elders had an easier time, and I do not mean to reduce or denigrate their effort, but they could keep each other more accountable than we do. They were in a better position to do so because they were fewer, and because feminism was institutional there were more levers for them to pull. So, I'd like to understand how we can use this document as it evolves or as it is expanded to hold ourselves accountable to our politic because we might do miraculous things that have never been seen before. You might be in Kenya and someone from Togo should be able to tell you that this is not a faithful representation of the politic that you claim.

JK: Thank you, Brenda. You mention two interesting things which I want to run across the group. One is solidarity... how do we activate solidarity? And the other is about politicising feminist ideology within a Pan-Africanist framework – an ideology that is oppositional to the nation state but also allows us to blend in our shared experiences of religion, colonisation or ethno-national supremacies in our own countries or class. I want us to talk about solidarity and accountability in relation to the Charter, but also contextualised within your own countries, regions or localities. Larissa, I'll bring you in now.

LK: What I've observed is that Central Africa in general is at the margin when it comes to feminist organising. We don't see much feminist mobilisation, even in DRC, except on specific topics such as gender-based violence during the 16

days of activism. But when there are real issues such as women's representation in institutions like parliament or asking government to respect the conventions that they have ratified, such as the Maputo Protocol, we don't see that much mobilisation. We see a lot of feminist work in silos. It might be because Central Africa is not as connected as West and East Africa are, or it may be because feminism is still kind of institutionalised in our region and restricted only to well-educated women from urban cities. Such women are in NGOs; they travel but there's a disconnect with what's happening on the ground. And the issues of queer women are totally absent from feminist questioning and organising in Central Africa.

I recently coordinated a project on countering anti-feminism involving four countries in Central Africa. I met Elisa, who is a trans woman from DRC; she's a well-known feminist activist who has advocated for so many things, including access to education for young girls, intersex and trans people. She's vocal and visible, but because she's queer, the former minister of justice wanted to use her to gain some political capital – you know how they instrumentalise LGBT. So, she had published a report and presented it to the head of the national commission on human rights; it was a cordial meeting. When a record of the meeting was published in the commission's newsletter, people were not happy at all: "How can you receive gay people, as commissioner?" It became a big issue to the extent that Elisa was summoned to the Ministry of Justice. She wanted to fly out of the DRC but couldn't. Fortunately, she was a UN consultant, and they intervened and she was able to leave the country and hide in Ivory Coast for six months. No one, no feminist, no organisation, nobody said anything about that incident. They all knew her and valued the work she was doing, but once she was in trouble they abandoned her. It was really disappointing. She said, "When an activist is in trouble, you don't start asking who's a woman and who's not." But the feminists in this country are always fighting over the issue of who's a woman and who's not. I think it's linked to the spirit of the Charter because it's so broad and holds an implicit bias in favour of cis-heterosexual women – its reference to "womanhood," "motherhood" are in relation to patriarchy and economic access but not to the body, sexuality or identity. There are many people who identify as feminists but are yet to deconstruct many issues, and this is something we need to pay attention to: solidarity and accountability.

JK: You bring out the conceptualisation of womanhood, whether in the Charter's silence of that definition or as a premise of solidarity. The complexity of womanhood is often seen when it comes to issues of gender identity and sex work. Liyema, how do you conceptualise solidarity and accountability in relation to the Charter and to queer sex work organising?

LS: Larissa, I like the way you've articulated everything you just said, especially because I've always wondered how we can truly define what a feminist is. What is feminism? Because I've always found that we identify as feminists and within the same breath we discredit other feminist struggles. You'll see us being humiliated even on Twitter about how we don't even understand what this movement is. As women, we're constantly at each other's throats as well.

Let me bring the point home again with sex work. One of our biggest oppositions... obviously we know about the religious sector that's always saying that we're committing the biggest sin and won't make it to heaven, and that's why our bodies and our labour should always be criminalised. And then you have the other women that say that we're feminists and we stand for women, and the reason why we don't want sex work being decriminalised is that there's possibly never a woman that would want to be a sex worker. I feel that in that same breath you have taken away my sense of agency as another feminist in my movement. And I don't know how we'll get to a point where there's a bridge that joins these two issues. It's extremely frustrating. Even when Larissa was speaking, I was thinking, "Oh my God, this is the fight that we have amongst ourselves every day; people trying to say, "You don't belong here; your movement is not a feminist movement." We do not appreciate each other's struggles. So, there's literally a lack of solidarity even in supporting each other's movements. Why do I support women only when it suits me or when it aligns with what benefits me? Why don't I support women in all their diversity? We really need to understand and unpack what feminism truly is and what it means. Feminism is about being your sister's keeper, not constantly being the one that is asking, "Why your movement?" and pointing out "Why you shouldn't be doing this..."

I appreciate the Charter in its language and how it talks about what it is that we're trying to break down. It's also important to understand that patriarchy is quite different for all of us. The way that you've experienced

patriarchy is definitely not the same way that I may have experienced it. There might be common ideas but there's a certain way we differ. For instance, for a sex worker, patriarchy is me being violated by the police every day; it's me facing stigma and fear; it's me not being able to access services or being extorted. For someone else it is a woman who cannot speak up in her own home about what her children should wear. There's different levels of this and I don't know how we can find a synergy, support each other and even hold ourselves accountable. When you look at the other struggle and you think that it doesn't link to yours, how do you then re-evaluate the situation and tell yourself to remember the core idea that "I'm for women in all our diversity"?

JK: I love that... I love your point on solidarity across movements, but also you critically bring out a topic which I want us to move to. How does patriarchy manifest in all your different locations, and what variations do you experience? Is the Charter able to respond to those variations or are there some other ways that it should respond to them? These are some of the things that I've found problematic; the idea that we need a sex worker movement, a queer movement and a women's movement. For me that is very much rooted in an NGO industrial complex approach in which our lives are categorised as thematic areas and so... there's sex worker funding, queer funding, movements funding, poor women's funding... All this funding demands that you demarcate yourself into these things which I don't think reflects the ways that we live lives. I could be a queer sex worker *and* a grassroots organiser. I don't understand why if, for example, I need access to healthcare for sex work, I have to go to these people, and then if I need solidarity and accountability, I have to go to these other people. So, I want us to politicise this need for movement separation and what that does to solidarity and accountability. But let's pin that for now and focus on how patriarchy manifests itself. Mira, can you speak about solidarity in relation to how patriarchy manifests in Morocco and North Africa generally? I feel that in the African Feminist Forums that I've been at, we haven't heard so much from North Africans in relation to how patriarchy manifests.

MA: I think that solidarity is one of the most important pillars of feminism because what patriarchy has taught us over decades and over time is that we as women should compete; we should be envious of each other, fear each other, talk bad about each other. Patriarchy tries to transfer these ideas to even little girls. Feminism should be about women supporting other women and not

competing with each other. We should dismantle that idea of women fearing each other because it's important when we support each other and believe in each other's stories and struggles in a patriarchal society.

In North Africa, including Morocco, patriarchy has become subtler institutionally, socially, culturally and also digitally. With the advances in technology over the last 20 years, there's a lot of online patriarchy (if that makes sense). For instance, in Morocco we see laws that control women's bodies, such as the criminalisation of sex outside marriage. I've always spoken out against this law, and Moroccan feminists are against such control of women's bodies. Some women who have been assaulted and report to the police end up being arrested and charged under this law; this means that many rape victims do not speak out for fear of being wrongly accused and going to jail for something that they've been a victim of. In addition, abortion is still criminalised in Morocco and that is problematic because if a woman gets pregnant outside of marriage, she will seek illegal and unsafe abortion. Even when she decides to secretly have the child, that too is illegal and she cannot obtain proper documents for the child. In all this, the father of the child is not held responsible! The plight of single mothers in Morocco is dire, given these misogynistic laws. I've received a lot of online hate mail and harassment for debating these issues in Morocco. So, if such a basic right is denied to women, Moroccans cannot even fathom the idea of decriminalising sex work.

JK: Yeah... you touch on backlash, and I want us to conceptualise backlash as a manifestation of patriarchy. Because when we contextualise... what Wunpini talked about Nigerian "feminists" doing the "...I'm a feminist but I like patriarchy sometimes!" kind of feminism. Radical twitter was in the 2010s, and the fact that we're back full circle, having the same regular conversations, is gaslighting. But also, we could conceptualise this recurrence as one way that the patriarchy manifests across social media platforms and generations and re-invents itself – the fact that we are able to have these same conversations, the same backlash, same narrative. Another element that I see happening is that algorithms reward misogyny. And of course this is patriarchy reinventing itself within digital platforms. I'm curious about how patriarchy reinvents itself in grassroots organising, in offices and in institutions. Here, I want to bring Brenda in; how does patriarchy reinvent itself within the radical optimism of Kenyan organising and these large movements?

BW: For us, specifically, it is naked violence. We have been organising as Kenyan feminists and as a wider women's movement on violence against women since we started the "End Femicide KE Movement" in 2019 when it became apparent to us that these were cases of gendered violence or femicide. Unfortunately, we've realised an uptick in these kinds of cases. The state permits violence to everybody, and because patriarchy as a system of oppression has "non-men" as its targets, women get targeted; so, it's basically cascading. As the space for economic progress, self-actualisation and whatever else has reduced, the violence against women in Kenya has increased. So, the necessity for a movement has been key.

I firmly believe that we would not have had the awakening of the national movement that we've had which began with rejecting the 2024 Finance Bill, nor the #RutoMustGo protests, without the #EndFemicide march that happened in January 2024, which proved that we could have decentralised marches in every county, in towns and cities. The "leaderlessness" of those marches ensured that the state does not have people that it can target as convenors. It also prevents cults of personality or what I like to call "personality politics." We cannot become or stake our names on becoming someone based on feminism because this is not about public profile. Political movements are deeply unpopular for a reason, especially those that are centred around expanding freedoms. So, one of the things we need to ask ourselves is: when you become a personality off a politic that is, by definition, unpopular, we have to ask ourselves questions. So, violence is one of the ways it is manifested.

Even women in Kenya who have not been politicised or political as women occupy the space that has been availed to them with access to education, financial institutions and so on. So, there's an increased visibility of women in the Kenyan public space that is outside of the cascading state violence. It feels to men and to the greater society like women are taking up "too much space."

Then, I'd like to bring in my delusional optimism and to cite a feminist elder in Kenya – Shailja Patel – who really changed how I think. Imagine an upward spiral or spring with the smallest part of the coil at the bottom, but every single time it goes up it widens just a bit more. So, every single time we feel like we are revisiting or renegotiating, we are never revisiting or

renegotiating the exact same thing. We may feel despondent and wonder, “Why are we having the exact same conversation that we’ve had before?” She told me, “It’s never the same conversation, if you imagine that it keeps on coming back, and each point it comes back to the centre, you just refuse to see it or its work, unfortunately.” It sucks and I detest it, but every single time it comes back... because what they are doing or what the system does is it prods and just seems to say: “Are they going to let us get away with this, this time?” So, as soon as you say, “No” – and there are always new people watching – some sixteen-year-old like me, a nineteen-year-old somewhere else – just looking because she needs the language. So, it feels like you’re doing this over and over, but each time, you get more people who then fight the battle from more fronts because we have more activists; they are investments in themselves. Imagine telling people to cede bank accounts... who wants to do that? Who wants to go back? Some things we’ve already won and we’re not going to revisit... even the most patriarchal women will not allow it. So, for me, removing the need for plodding – wanting to stop to acknowledge how far we’ve come and so on – we should just look at feminism as a political project, as an ideological movement, as the thing that moves all of us forward and remove the need for personality cults (because I think that’s where all the mistakes happen); if we did that, we could do great things.

JK: I really love the idea of depersonalising politics and how the very notion of a personality in relation to African... particularly African feminist organising is such a neoliberal idea because it relies on this idea of the individual and I don’t think that is even true in terms of how African feminism has largely developed or even how we live our lives. Larissa, I’m going to bring you in to talk about trans women’s experiences around patriarchal manifestation in relation to African feminism.

LK: I’m not sure that I understood your question, but I would say that institutionalisation works like the centre of feminism in Central Africa. There are specific people who claim a feminist identity – university graduates, workers in NGOs and so on. You’re seen as a feminist if you’re part of that group. This may not be the case everywhere, but it’s the general trend. People who struggle to use the same language, same jargon, are seen as being outside that identity. Not only are they intimidated, but their work is not valued enough by “mainstream” feminists. It’s also linked to the paternalistic way of doing

feminism; it's almost like there are people who know what feminism is and others who don't.

But I also have to say that I have noticed that it's a generational issue. Even though we can still see that most people who claim the feminist label are well-educated women from the cities, you have the younger generations who are more open to many other issues, like queer issues, trans questions [and] sex work, but for now they don't have that much power in the ecosystem. We still have those "mothers" that are firmly holding the reins and are really not likely to let go.

JK: Thank you. I'm cognisant of our time and I want to open the floodgates for the gaps in the Charter. Wunpini, I'll give you the first swing. I want you to re-echo some of the critiques that you'd mentioned earlier.

WM: I want to briefly touch on the patriarchy issue before I get to the gaps. I quickly want to talk about how patriarchy manifests, not just in Ghana but across the continent. We have colonial patriarchy and then African patriarchal systems; those of us educated in Western institutions are assimilated into colonial patriarchy. Therefore, even if we're feminist, we often do not realise that we were socialised into colonial patriarchal systems and so we put our efforts into undoing or dismantling African patriarchal systems which we often frame in very colonial ways as barbaric and backward while actively safeguarding and protecting colonial patriarchal systems. That's something I've noticed across the continent and within the Ghanaian feminist movement where, for example, feminists can serve as gatekeepers of colonial patriarchal systems. I'm really interested in patriarchy on the systemic level because very often we tend to get lost in the inter-personal as opposed to the structural – while the structural shapes and produces the inter-personal. I'm able to see this because I didn't go to boarding school (thank God) where colonial patriarchal systems manifest most prominently.

It is just interesting to see the way that feminists end up becoming agents of patriarchy and determine who is disposable and who can be thrown under the bus. Right now, I'm sharing my own personal experience and that can be connected to all of the axes of oppression that we've been discussing. Sex workers and women in rural communities are disposable and therefore can be thrown under the bus. Another gap that I noticed is disability rights; people

with disabilities can also be thrown under the bus and their identity is not constructed within the African Feminist Charter. Ethnicity is not even discussed at all because the people who draft these charters – the people in the big rooms where these decisions are made – are often from the dominant ethnic groups, so they don't have to contend with people of other ethnicities; it's just like our own version of White feminism, but on the continent. And this is how colonial patriarchy obfuscates power hierarchies intra-communally (I don't want to say inter-nationally because I'm moving away from borders). Recently, I've been working on projects in African communities and one thing I like about the Charter is that it espouses an explicitly feminist stance and doesn't even try to debate the Africanness of feminism – thank God. I think that's radical, given that it was in 2006, whereas today we have books such as, *Can feminism be African?*

So, these are some of the issues I've been contending with. Intra-community violence, patriarchal violence, can manifest as far as all these identities are concerned, and the way it happens is that a lot of us are implicated in preserving colonial patriarchal systems while attacking and doing the work of dismantling African patriarchal systems across the board.

Another thing that I noticed was the use of binaries throughout the Charter. I understand that this was the 2006 use of “man” and “woman”. So, when I re-imagine the Charter, one of the things we can think about is to, you know, we can still use the word “Charter,” but we could also think of an alternative name that is not jargonised so that feminists who are not in these institutionalised spaces can feel that they relate to the issues that are being discussed. When I think of the notion of “woman,” because identities are ever expanding and evolving, it is imperative that in the revision of the Charter we define womanhood in an expansive term just like the way that we define “Gender.” We can reconstruct womanhood to embrace all these categories – sex workers, the disabled, etc. Just as we grew up reading textbooks that referred to “*mankind*,” man, man, man, I think we can use woman in this context where “woman” is defined in a more expansive way: “We are not using it in the biological sense or in ways that can be exclusionary of others, but in an expansive way that is inclusive of people from marginalised religions, ethnic groups, disabled people, sex workers, and so on.” And also take note of the fact

that “The category of womanhood will keep expanding as our politics and identities evolve within the African and global feminist space.”

Another thing we can do is to mainstream the Charter and make it useful for feminist praxis at the workplace, at home and in the public sphere. As we did when we had African feminist wars, Nigeria-Ghana, Nigeria-Uganda, I want us to be able to pull out [relevant excerpts] and say, “According to the Feminist Charter...” We can call it the Feminist Bible or the African Feminist Quran – whatever you want to call it, in a way that makes it legible to Africans who can say “Oh, there is an African Feminist Bible or Quran or whatever that I can consult to understand what African feminism is!” Because no matter how we describe it, we have to figure out a way to talk about African feminisms that do not exclude marginalised groups. I don’t think that African feminisms need to follow the trajectories of Western feminisms with these waves because we don’t have the same historical legacy; so, we need to move away from that.

We should also redefine patriarchy beyond male authority, and that’s why I gave the two examples that I’ve noticed – African patriarchy and colonial patriarchy. All of these patriarchies can be connected to other global systems such as neocolonialism and globalisation. I actually have page numbers... page six could be more gender expansive instead of using “men and women.” It also refers to the outdated term “gender equality” which we need to rethink while building into our feminist praxis issues such as the abolitionist framework. Whereas in the American context, the abolitionist framework manifests around the prison system and police brutality, in Africa it manifests in the prison system and police brutality but, very importantly, also in the military system, which is organised against youth movements across the continent to support political repression.

Then there are also aspects of the Charter that talk about women being in leadership positions and institutions, but I think we need to complicate that because I literally just noted that Samia Suluhu Hassan has scattered things over in Tanzania. She’s a woman and I would have preferred a man president who would not be killing and arresting and attacking women. So, that’s why I think that we need to re-define womanhood. In that sense, womanhood can include men who are radical in the way that transmen are. Womanhood in the

African feminist sense can be used in the way that mankind has been used to describe the world.

JK: Joy James, one of my favourite Black feminists, has this concept called *the captive maternal* who is genderless, whose labour legitimises nation state violence and whose care is very instrumental in keeping communities together; and I like that notion of womanhood. Your idea of an African Feminist Bible makes me think of us having an aspect of the Charter that is self-help. You know... the usual everyday things like, “If my boyfriend breaks up with me, what should I do?”; “How should I handle gender-based violence?”; “How do I know if I’m being emotionally abused?” These little snippets that people can pull out and use without a need for an institution.

I also want to talk about the role of love within our own organising. We do a lot of feminist and community work, but without love (and humour) as the central thing driving us, we lose some of those concepts. Liyema, can you speak to the gaps that you see in the Charter. How do we voice the silences that you talked about earlier; how do you see the Charter activating those silences?

LS: Let me first appreciate the opportunity to have a review of the Charter. That’s the first step of seeing some adaptations being made. I’m quite passionate about language because it’s literally how we communicate, share each other’s struggles and see alignment with our movements. So, the silence in the Charter just on sex work will be my core focus. In a subtle way, the Charter describes the challenges of a female worker, but it does not explicitly say that this includes sex workers. For example, if the Charter mentions that the feminist movement stands in solidarity with sex workers, it gives some legitimacy to the work that sex workers do. Here in South Africa, sex work is criminalised and the Charter is an advocacy tool; it’s something I can hold and point to as an African document that was adopted by feminists from all walks of life who are saying that sex work and sex workers deserve to be protected. I can’t make reference to a Charter that I don’t feel is for me or that is silent about me. As Wunpini said, words mean something; words count and naming sex workers in the Charter is not just symbolic, it communicates our political standing. So, when you name a marginalised group, you are actually politicising that movement as well. It’s an important political strategy that we should adopt.

I also think that in naming sex workers, you recognise them as workers, as women and as part of the feminist movement. When you look at the history of sex work, since biblical times, many feminist movements have been led and supported by sex workers. It's quite frightening when we see other feminists move away from our movement. For instance, in 2022 we submitted a draft Bill seeking to decriminalise sex work in South Africa. As much as the Bill did not go through parliamentary phases for adoption as legislation, we did not get major support from the feminist groups. There were not enough feminists making submissions to parliament about the importance of this Bill in terms of protecting the bodily autonomy of women and the choices women make when it comes to making money. Sex work is never just about promiscuity, as religious structures want us to believe; it's also about my ability to protect and offer a shelter for my child. I want my child to go to school. It's about having the power to improve my life economically. So, when we don't talk about these things explicitly it means that we're sweeping them under the rug; we are not different from the patriarchal system that we're trying to fight. I also think it's quite important to remember that patriarchy is constantly evolving. I liked the analogy of the spiral; my understanding of it is that as much as we're saying the same thing at different times, different issues are happening... it's getting wider and wider. Things are evolving and we need to do the same in our train of thought. That means that documents like this also need to evolve. We should not be afraid of offending people. Our document needs to speak to issues of women in their diversity. Let's make it real; let's have our lived experiences made real and let's see ourselves in the Charter.

JK: Thank you very much, Liyema. Let me switch to Mira... speak to the gaps that you see in the Charter, especially for North Africa's younger feminist organising realities.

MA: Let me reiterate the need to use explicit language when it comes to marginalised women including LBGTQ+ rights, particularly transgender rights. This is because when we talk about "womanhood" we're not talking about woman vs. female; it's not the same thing. For example, a trans woman should also feel included in the feminist movement. My best friend is a Moroccan trans woman, and I have seen, through her eyes, how hard it is to be a trans woman in her country. The struggles that she deals with... her family disowned her, she lost her job because she can't go to the office "looking like a

woman.” The problem is that though she deals with those struggles, she is a firebrand and she continues to own up to it and to live her reality even if society does not accept her. She cannot even go to a government institution for any document because her legal ID has a different name and photograph. So, feminism in Africa needs to be more intersectional and include all identities and all genders.

Another gap has to do with the digital world. Technologies are evolving and now we have social media; everybody has a presence and a life on social media. So, patriarchy has moved to those platforms as well and it’s getting worse, especially in my country. When I’m on Instagram, for example, I see posts about feminism and the comment section... if it’s an American influencer that has posted, I see a lot of support in the comments because it’s a person from the West that has posted it. But when a Moroccan feminist does the same thing, it’s another story... they’ll say that it’s a Western idea: “You will destroy our values,” “Don’t bring Western ideologies to our country,” “You’re ruining our family values,” and all that. The Charter mentions that African feminism is not a Western idea; that African feminists have been fighting patriarchy even before colonialism. So, returning to the digital world... we now see violence in the digital world, not only in the form of bullying but also sexual harassment, manipulation, blackmailing and coercion, and these are things I’ve dealt with personally. I know first-hand how challenging it can be to be coerced and exploited online. These are things that women are dealing with nowadays. I would like the Charter to bring out these realities and evolve with the technologies that we’re dealing with today. One of my dreams is to start an initiative in Morocco and across Africa to deal with adult online violence that we face as women.

JK: Thank you. I can see we’re running out of time, so Brenda, I’m going to bring you in. How do we queer the Charter and how can the Charter include a digital reality?

BW: Coming from a queer feminist perspective – and it’s not even a politic but just a state of mind reflecting my reality – I’m informed by a love of women as people, especially in a system where we’re socialised from birth to view ourselves as “less than.” So, for me that’s the value that makes queerness relevant to the conversation and is at the root of the work that I do. When I

compare myself at the time that I came to feminism, to when I evolved as a radical feminist, and now, I think the biggest growth that I have experienced is just an acceptance... a quiet acceptance that women are human beings and human beings are imperfect. There's a temptation sometimes, which I have succumbed to multiple times, to hold us to a standard that sometimes is unreal. So, if we are fighting... if we look at things via first principles (and I know that first principles have gained a bad rap from "tech bros" – so, just to divorce it from "tech bros" immediately), but, what do we want? We want women to be able to experience their full humanity, and this is being prevented by patriarchy. Patriarchy is extracting resources and labour from women; it is keeping resources from people it designates as "Other," that is, women. Our arguments are actually solid; sometimes when I see people fighting, I understand why they are doing so, but one of the reasons I don't get involved in these fights is that I know we are right. This is not a basis upon which anybody should be deprived.

So, I would like to propose a Charter or document that still defines the basics but with a really thick FAQ-section that literally can be referenced for anything. For instance, "Why are we gender-expansive?" and provide the answer... say, "Because gender is a category that has been fabricated by society for people to be Othered." And we can do this for multiple issues. Such additional details would be helpful whenever people want to reference the Charter, especially because what we need is more "all hands on deck," people who are better informed, because a lot of women have their heads and hearts in the right place; it's just that there's an information gap. I am not going to be myself... none of us will be ourselves all the time. Right? So, give people the information and this is where the digital space can come in.

For example, the Charter or other relevant material can be placed on the AWDF website or in a stand-alone place where people can just refer to anything such as, "What are the African feminist positions on: sex work, queer persons, trans people's rights?" So that people can refer to this, gauge and continue the conversation, use it not just as a tool for their own education but for engagement in their communities. The tragedy would be if the conversation ever stopped; this is my delusional optimism coming back... the day it stops is the day we should start crying! I am extremely optimistic because the conversation continues. For instance, Kemigisa has brought in that abolitionist perspective, which in many cases today, sounds like being in rarefied air, with

many wondering, “What do you mean?” We’ve come to just accept some of these carceral structures as default; that it’s unimaginable to even argue for something different... like if you argue about the carcerality of throwing everyone in jail, people say, “But what would we do with criminals?” Just a failure of imagination. As long as there are people pulling us towards a more expansive and imaginative future, the feminist movement on the continent (and in our respective countries) is in the right place. We are led by an idea for freedom, a desire for freedom. That’s how I see the landscape moving forward.

JK: Okay, to wrap up on our dreams... Wunpini, where do we see the African Feminist Charter in relation to the imminent death of the NGO? Because the Charter names organisations and institutions... where do we see the Charter 20 years ahead, knowing that the current reality is a dying NGO?

WM: That’s an excellent question, given that the Charter was drafted in 2006 at a point the NGO industrial complex was at its apex, and right now in our current reality it’s dying, thanks to Trumpism. So, I want to go back to the points I made earlier... I believe that when we move beyond the institutionalisation of knowledge and feminist praxis and mainstream it in the ways that are presented and in the examples that have been given, like the self-help, the FAQs and all that, I think that it would have a long-lasting or more sustainable impact on feminisms across the continent.

One of the things that I value about the Charter, which we should maintain, is the linguistic plurality, and I would like to see the Charter even in audio forms in African languages so that people who are not literate are able to listen and follow *The Continent* (a WhatsApp newspaper) model of, say, making journalism accessible to the masses. Here we can make feminism accessible to these communities where there are television and radio programmes that discuss feminism and feminist issues in African languages. These are some of the spaces that we can move the Charter to beyond the institutions.

I would like to see the Charter using digital platforms, so that when I argue with someone about African feminism, I can pull out this thing that we constructed. I think there’s a gap in African feminist popular cultural spaces in the public sphere where a lot of up-and-coming feminists in their evolution often have to go to Europe first before they come back to Africa and engage with African feminists; it’s a legacy of colonialism and colonial feminism. So, I

would like to see the Charter be the first place they go to rather than the double work of going to the West and then saying, “Huh, European feminisms do not fit what I’m looking for...” before they are guided towards African feminisms. I want to see the Charter mainstreamed or normalised in spaces, say the workplace; if someone is experiencing discrimination at work, they can pull it out and use it to defend themselves.

Africa has a very vibrant PSA (public service announcement) or public campaign system in which we have often used media tools such as radio drama, posters and indigenous forms of communication to do this kind of work. There are also African institutions that we can lean into to support the work that has been done here. So, if we want to talk about “witch camps” in Ghana, I should be able to say, “Well there’s a Charter here that helps us discuss these issues that are gendered and understand why women are subjected to this kind of gendered violence.” I don’t think that NGOs are completely useless; they have done important work of connecting with communities and opinion leaders to support messaging. So, we can learn from the NGO model how to... I don’t want to use the term “disseminate” because of the root of that word but spread or broadcast the message of the Charter in ways that are intelligible to everyone, not just feminist institutions or educated African feminists.

JK: Thank you, Wunpini. Larissa...

LK: I totally agree with Wunpini and if I have to add something, it would be to re-politicise our civil society. I know it would be challenging but we have large community-based civil society groupings and if we can make it popular in those movements, that would be a perfect way for the Charter to have a life. It can be used in schools, in professional environments and in governments, when you deal with institutions.

JK: Thank you very much. One of the other things that I was thinking about when dreaming about the Charter in its next iteration is, can we think of its existence outside the nation state? The Charter as Pan-African in its political ideology; the Charter transgressing these borders... Just quickly think outside the box... the wildest thing that you dream the Charter to be... if the African Feminist Forum held its conference and gave you the power to dream... Liyema, dream!

LS: My dream would be for the Charter to be more inclusive and accessible; you know, in the way patriarchy indoctrinates children. As a girl child you get dolls and teapots, and a boy child gets cars and guns. Now, let's use the African Feminist Charter to indoctrinate the youth. Let's have people be in the know about feminism at all levels.

LK: I'd like our Charter Principles to somehow be incorporated into the national mottos across Africa. Not only would it hold symbolic importance, but also it would have political and legal significance.

JK: I'll drop in my dream as well... When I think about the African Feminist Charter as self-help for all of us, I think about – no offence to the Christians here – the annoyance and the audacity of a street preacher who gets on public transport and bores the hell out of you using the bible. We also need street preachers who are just boring everyone; they wake up every day and preach: “Do not beat your wife... This is what the African Feminist Charter says... if you beat your wife you'll go to hell! The police will arrest you!” So, my wildest dream is a street preacher version of the African Feminist Charter.

I dream of the African Feminist Forum holding one sitting where all invited attendees come in with their communities and networks and have a conference that's just based on mapping all feminist communities and grassroots organising in all its variations, each accompanied by a translation. Mira, what is your wildest dream?

MA: My wildest dream is to just put it out there... it doesn't matter if it's outrageous to the public, if they don't accept it... just put it out there because after all feminism is about speaking up. It's about female liberation. It's about using our voice. So, even if the idea or concept that we want to talk about is unacceptable, it should just be spoken about. Even if just one person agrees, or considers your perspective, that's a win for me. Feminism is about change; we want to change our reality and create a better world for women and for everyone.

BW: Ultimately, my dream is to live in a world where we talk about the feminist movement as an undeniable success in past tense, and the African Feminist Charter is cited as one of the tools that helped us arrive at a place where African women, and women across the world, are free from patriarchal oppression. In the near future, my dream is for material improvements in the lives of the girls

and young women in generations after mine, such that they are able to take for granted the space that we and our foremothers fought for and build upon the body of African feminist knowledge. In all this, I wish us long, joyful and fulfilling lives as we do this life-changing work, because we are worthy and we deserve it.