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## **African feminism discussion paper July 2022**

### **Introduction**

This discussion paper on African feminism stems from a mid-term monitoring and evaluation survey of the Canadian Government funded Women Voice and Leadership (WVL) Programme grantees. The Fund was set up as part of the Canadian government's Feminist International Assistance Policy, which targets gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls around the world, using a feminist approach. It supports the economic, political and social empowerment of women and girls, and makes gender equality a priority, for the benefit of all people.

As part of a mid-term evaluation of the Women's Voice and Leadership Project, grantees were asked how they described their organisation. The four options were women's rights organization, feminist organization, organization that promotes gender equality, and human rights organization. Just four of 28 (14%) organisations chose feminist organisation, and just three organisations (11%) identified as women's rights organisations (WROs) while the majority 62% of the organisations referred to themselves as "organisations that promote gender equality".

These results have raised concern over the shared understanding of the term feminism amongst women's rights organisations in general and WVL grantees in particular, and has pointed to the need for building a common understanding of the often polarizing term.

The dictionary defines feminism as **'the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim'**

Like in many African countries, feminism is a contentious term in South Africa that has often been construed as being "anti-men." Feminism is also something that can be understood or interpreted very differently.

### **Discomfort with the term *feminism***

*"I struggle with the insistence on using the term feminist. It means something else to everyone. The word means nothing to my mother, grandmother, or aunt. It means nothing to most of the women we are supporting and sometimes it is an alienating word. It would be better to use words that people understand."*

This is backed up through monitoring visits, which also illustrate the rural /urban divide in understanding and acceptance of the term feminism, especially among smaller rural grantees and particularly for the beneficiaries in these communities. Many were either unfamiliar with feminism, misconstrued it as being about punishing men, or in the case of beneficiaries expressed overt hostility towards the term feminism.

*"I think that one also has to accept that there are different ideological strands (radical, less radical, etc.) and I think this is okay. Different groups will have different points of reference. What is important is to be respectful. If you say you are feminist, you are not saying you are anti-men."*

Linked to this is the role of men in addressing women's rights, which is seen as an important component for the grantees work, one focus group member in a rural area said:

*"This gender inequality is not a problem for women. It is a problem for society. We need men's involvement to say why gender is important. As a country and society we have focused on women trying to solve gender inequality. It is not fair; the victim shouldn't have to solve the problems on their own. Men are the perpetrators and must be involved in the solution."*

Some grantees expressed more positive views on feminism, one grantee spoke of how *"The feminist approach does empower individuals. I didn't know I was a feminist before, but when they explained what it really was, I identified with it. Being a feminist for me, boosts me to stand up for myself and be a leader."*

Excerpts from the Results from the Women's Voice and Leadership grantee organisation survey report

This paper will interrogate what it means to be feminist in Africa and how 'African' feminisms are similar to, but differ from, 'Western' feminisms. It provides a brief history of African feminisms and how they have evolved over time. It aims to open up dialogue on how women continue to uphold patriarchy and the traditional belief that culture and norms cannot change. It discusses the continued need for feminisms, whether men can be feminist and what the future of African Feminism might look like.

It is, however, important at the start to state the feminism is not homogenous, there are different forms of feminisms, which have a complicated history of values, ideas and people that are sometimes in conflict with one another.



## Global: Brief history of feminism

Feminism is term that was coined in the west at the mid-1800s organised largely around the mobilization for woman suffrage in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The '**First Wave**' feminism had a fairly simple goal: have society recognize that women are humans, not property. Leaders of the 1st-wave feminism were abolitionists, and their focus was on white women's rights, an issue that afflicted the feminist movement for decades to come.<sup>1</sup> The first wave of feminism waned following the passing of the U.S Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 giving women the right to vote; as well as the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. Feminism "revived" in the late 1960s and early 1970s as "**Second Wave**" feminism, which built on first-wave feminism and challenged what women's role in society should be, focusing on the institutions that held women back. In this wave feminists questioned traditional gender and family roles. Major

<sup>1</sup> Emmaline Soken-Huberty, 'Types of Feminism: The Four Waves', *Human Rights Careers* (blog), 28 February 2021, <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/types-of-feminism-the-four-waves/>.

victories of this wave included the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Roe V Wade in 1973, which gave American women the right to have an abortion; and queer theory became more recognised as a feminist issue. Three main types of feminism emerged during this wave: *Mainstream feminism* focused on institutional reforms, which meant reducing gender discrimination, giving women access to male-dominated spaces, and promoting equality. *Radical feminism* wanted to reshape society entirely, saying that the system was inherently patriarchal and only an overhaul would bring liberation. It resisted the belief that men and women were basically the same. *Cultural feminism* had a similar view and taught that there's a "female essence" that's distinct from men.<sup>2</sup> Building on the institutional victories 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism which gave women more rights and power, '**Third-Wave**' feminism of the 1990s started to grapple with other aspects of their identity, such a sexual orientation and gender identity, and was characterised by embracing individuality and rebellion. While the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism largely ignored racial disparities, 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism also became more conscious of race. Kimberle Crenshaw, a gender and critical-race scholar, coined the phrase "intersectionality" in 1989. The term refers to how different kinds of oppression – like those based on gender, race, class and disability – intersect with each other. The phrase "third-wave feminism" was coined in 1992 by Rebecca Walker, a 23-year old Black bisexual woman. With the advancement and growing use of technology it became easier to hear perspectives and ideas from feminists around the world, expanding the movement. While there may not have been a major shift in ideologies, because of the resurgence of attacks on women's rights and the MeToo movement some feminists believe we have entered the '**Fourth wave**' feminism, which is said to have begun around 2012. The use of social media for activism has propelled the movement firmly into the technological age. Fourth-wave feminism continues to grapple with intersectionality. Many fourth-wave feminists are working to combat exclusion of trans women and other non-binary individuals, who have in previous waves of feminisms been excluded. As with every wave before it the fourth wave is complex. It encompasses many movements that both complement and clash with each other. This tension is unavoidable. While some types of feminism can have harmful impacts, having a variety of voices makes feminism more inclusive and successful. The climatecrisi has also come into sharp focus in this wave, with feminist movements demanding that women have a seat at the table, and that all solutions to the crisis are informed by feminist knowledge and principles.

### ***Feminism and race***

Throughout the various waves of feminism there has been ongoing criticism of "white feminism," which ignores the unique struggles of women of colour and marginalises non-white feminist's knowledge and ideas.

### **Continental: African Feminisms<sup>3 4</sup>**

Western feminism has remained contentious and perceived as incompatible with African values; but like Western Feminisms, African feminisms are complex and not homogenous. For example the experiences and problems faced by women in north Africa vary considerably

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> What is African feminism and Actually? Says, 'What Is African Feminism, Actually?', 6 December 2017, <https://msafropolitan.com/2017/12/what-is-african-feminism-actually.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ayesha Imam et al., 'The African Feminist Forum Is an Independent Feminist Platform. It Has Been Hosted since Its Inception by the African Women's Development Fund.', n.d. Ayesha Imam et al., 'The African Feminist Forum Is an Independent Feminist Platform. It Has Been Hosted since Its Inception by the African Women's Development Fund.', n.d.

from those of women in Sub-Saharan Africa. Views of African feminisms vary greatly across the African continent as well as in the diaspora. There are ongoing debates on African feminism in scholarly publications and at international seminars. Some see feminism as a Western import, compared in some ways with cultural imperialism and (post-)colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Others argue that while the term 'feminism' in Africa is obviously an import just like every other English or French or Portuguese term is, the concept of feminist is not a western import and that while it may not have been called such, there have always been women who were feminist.<sup>6</sup> African feminism is rooted in the resistance against colonialism and the struggle for racial justice.

African feminist researchers have also argued that feminism in Africa undeniably entails specificities, and that although it may have the same broad goals as western feminism, some realities within the African context make its feminism somewhat distinct.

One of the biggest differences between Western and African feminisms is in their lived experiences. African feminism is rooted in African contexts and value systems and the fight against colonialism. In Africa feminism has been understood as being anti-men and hence against values of marriage, childbearing, and preservation of the family. African women who have been fighting for rights and justice may not see gender equality as their main goal. African women may fight for equal opportunities and access to health, economic and educational resources and decision-making positions like women in many countries outside Africa, however some strongly resist calling themselves feminists.



*Dr Josephine Olufunmilay Alexander Presentation on African Feminism, Waterford Kamhlaba Swaziland 2017; Photo: Melody Kandare*

### **African feminism spectrum**

Several feminisms have been identified within the African continent, reflecting the complexities entailed in being an African and a feminist (or even African and a woman) at the same time. All however distinguish themselves in one way or another from 'Western' feminism.

As an interest group, African feminism can be traced to the early twentieth century with women like Adelaide Casely-Hayford, the Sierra Leonian women's rights activist referred to as the "African Victorian Feminist" who contributed widely to both pan-African and feminist goals, Charlotte Maxeke who in 1918 founded the Bantu Women's League in South Africa and Huda Sharaawi who in 1923 established the Egyptian Feminist Union. African feminism as a movement stems also from the liberation struggles where women fighters fought alongside their male counterparts for state autonomy and women's rights. African feminist icons from this period are women like the Mau-Mau rebel, Wambui Otieno,

<sup>5</sup> Lilian Lem Atanga, 'African Feminism', *African Studies Centre Leiden*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/african-feminism>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Feminism Has Always Existed in Africa', 1 June 2012, <https://msafropolitan.com/2012/06/feminism-has-always-existed-in-africa.html>.

the freedom-fighters Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Margaret Ekpo and Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti among many others who fought against colonialism as well as patriarchy.

**Postcolonial African feminism**, 1960 to 2000s was an era largely inspired by Black and Third World feminisms elsewhere, small groups of African women started labelling themselves feminist. The landmark UN decade for women 1975 – 1985 further entrenched modern African feminism and resulted in feminist activism and scholarship spreading widely across the continent and diaspora. Since then the African feminist movement has expanded in policy, legislation, scholarship and also in the cultural realm.

Postcolonial African Feminism can be split into three categories that may overlap:

- **Radical African Feminism** – focuses on challenging patriarchy and traditional cultural and social norms and challenge the heteronormative family structure, as well as promote the rights of LGBTQI persons, and sex workers, as opposed to more conservative African feminists who remain distinctly pro-heterosexual (if not homophobic, sometimes citing religious reasons). Radical African Feminism is marked by “Voice”. Examples of Radical African feminists are Bessie Head, Awa Thiam, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal el Saadawi and Mariama Bâ; scholars like Amina Mama, Patricia MacFadden and Ayesha Imam.
- **Afrocentric African Feminism** – is marked by grappling with the un-Africanness and westernisation, debating and disagreeing about conflict between western and African values. Theories like “Motherism” emerged in this group as feminisms that centre African values, and which are not always progressive; there may be essentialist and homophobic values imported into this African feminist thinking. This form of feminism was to maintain and preserve African culture.
- **Grassroots African Feminism** – The grassroots and development focused postcolonial African feminism largely emerges in the 1980s and 1990s especially after the landmark UN decade for women 1975 – 1985 which resulted in a lot of coalition building as well as funding for feminist activism and scholarship across the continent and diaspora. It focused on so called ‘bread and butter’ issues such as poverty reduction, anti-FGM and violence prevention but also with intellectual activism concerning these issues. The Maputo Protocol is arguably predominantly an outcome of this type of feminism.<sup>7</sup>



**African feminisms today**, are still largely referring to feminism that could be located in any of the above three strands, but with the advent of the internet, blogs and social media, more African feminisms categories have emerged since the 2000s:

- **Liberal African Feminism** – has successfully championed feminist discussions about domestic gender roles, gender gaps and sexual rights. This strand of African feminism has made great strides in

<sup>7</sup> [Ms Afropolitan](https://msafropolitan.com/2013/07/a-brief-history-of-african-feminism.html#:~:text=Modern%20African%20feminism%20was%20solidified,also%20in%20the%20cultural%20realm.), A brief history of African Feminism, July 2013, <https://msafropolitan.com/2013/07/a-brief-history-of-african-feminism.html#:~:text=Modern%20African%20feminism%20was%20solidified,also%20in%20the%20cultural%20realm.> Accessed 27 June 2022

mainstreaming African feminism and bringing empowerment concepts to the masses, but it has perhaps failed to look critically at neoliberal capitalist values.

- **Millennial or 4th wave African Feminism** – may be considered the most explicitly feminist generation in Africa. This African feminism is marked by student protesting, fierce, vociferous and woke new voice of African feminism. This feminism has reinvigorated African feminism through the organisation of marches and demonstrations, coupled with high activity on social media. It has been very influential in calling out sexual violence against women, as the current '16 days' campaign shows. The criticism of this feminism is that it does not generally speaking engage with African feminist theory to the extent it would need to in order to also reform political life.
- **Afropolitan Feminism** – Afropolitanism describes the work and activism of 21st century Africans in Euro-America who challenge western discourses that malign Africa and connect women on the African continent to African women in the diaspora in a transnational and future-oriented approach to feminist liberation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Charter of African Feminist Principles for African Feminists**

Contemporary African feminist researchers<sup>9</sup> indicate that their feminist identity is not qualified with 'Ifs', 'Buts' or 'Howevers', The first African Feminist Forum in 2006 in Accra, Ghana brought together over 100 feminist activists from all over the region and the diaspora. The space was designed as an autonomous space for African feminists from all walks of life at different levels of engagement within the feminist movement to convene. The key outcome of the forum was the adoption of the Charter of Feminist Principles. In the preamble the principle of ***naming and identity*** is underscored:

"We define and name ourselves publicly as Feminist because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognise that work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves Feminist places us in a clear ideological position. By naming ourselves Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated and develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multiple and varies identities as African Feminists. We are African women when we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. Our feminist identity is not qualified with 'Ifs', 'Buts' of 'Howevers'. We are feminists. Full stop"



Today, African feminists scholars, activists, artists and politicians such as Leymah Gbowee, Joyce Banda, Simphiwe Dana and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as well as feminist organisations such as the African Feminist Forum and the African Gender Institute are at the forefront of using activism, knowledge and creativity to change situations that affect women negatively.

### **Regional: Southern Africa**

<sup>8</sup> Lilian Lem Atanga, 'African Feminism'. John Benjamins Publishing Company, March 2013

<sup>9</sup> Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama et al

The Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance was formed in 2005 to mobilise women's rights organisations and advocate for the adoption of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. While the Alliance journey started in 2005, it emerges from the 1980s to 1990s, Women's Movement that operated in persona agency, solidarity in dismantling patriarchy and calling for member States commitment and accountability. A growing sense of collaboration among multiple stakeholders arose from women's participation during the liberation struggles, where women fought side by side with men, constituting a good 10 to 30% of the cadres in the Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe liberation struggles. Women's role in armed struggles entrenched in historical, socialist myths in which narratives are limited by barriers of feminine and masculine power relations that date back decades and centuries. The need to educate both men and women in feminism from young age is central.

The Alliance continues to grow its membership with LGBTI+ organisations and partnerships with regional, international organisations such as Kaleidoscope Trust, SAfAIDS and MIET Africa. It takes the collaboration and implementation of the Alliance members to build a regional campaign over the past 20 years. Over the years, the Alliance action planning and strategy represent the diverse ideas and values of all members. There is effective participation, experimental learning and commitment in getting the work done on the ground and building a strong movement.<sup>10</sup>

GL board member Sara Longwe, a feminist activist based in Lusaka, Zambia, shows us what it means to be feminist.. She developed a method of analyzing gender issues popularly known as *Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework* in the global feminist and gender literature. Sara become a prime mover in a lobbying group that successfully pressed the Zambian government to introduce, in mid-70s, a provision for paid maternity leave at work places at national level. She played a vital role in pushing the government (1985) into ratifying the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW ) and the enactment of the 1989 statutory laws on inheritance of the deceased estate (i.e. wills and intestate). Also in 1986, she was one of the founder members of the Zambian Non-Governmental Organisational Coordination Council (NGOCC) – this was an offshoot of the UN's Decade for Women -1976-1985). NGOCC is the focal point for Zambian women's movement for advocacy of the implementation of gender policies and human rights instruments (national, regional and international). Sara co-founded a number of other civil society organisations and in her quest for improving women's empowerment at regional and international levels.<sup>11</sup>

## Local: South Africa

Women played a central role as political activists in the struggle against apartheid and the emancipation of black women in South Africa, though this has tended to be overlooked. Well known anti-apartheid and women's rights activists include **Winnie Madikizela-Mandela** political activist for equal rights and the emancipation of black women during the struggle for democracy in South Africa. **Charlotte Maxeke** led the way in establishing the ANC Women's League and encouraging women to engage in the struggle for freedom. **Albertina Sisulu, Helen Joseph**, together with **Lilian Ngoyi**, played a powerful role in the formation of FEDSAW, spearheading the women's march with other powerful female political leaders that protested against amendments to the pass laws.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://genderlinks.org.za/news/building-a-feminist-movement-in-southern-africa/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://genderlinks.org.za/about-us/who-we-are/board-of-directors/sara-longwe>

**Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka** former South African Deputy President represented African women on the global stage in her role as UN Women Executive Director where, for two terms, 2013-2021, she supported calls for an Africa where Gender Equality and Women's empowerment are recognized as important agendas not just for women but for the entire society. She significantly increased UN Women's influence within and outside the UN system, expanded its partnerships, achieved more focused impact at scale, and more than doubled in size and revenue. In addition to her unwavering support for civil society and women's organizations, Mlambo-Ngcuka brought in new advocates with emphasis on engaging youth, men and boys, traditional and cultural leaders, the private sector, philanthropies and the world of sport. She was also a strong supporter of a more coherent, accountable and coordinated UN system, working together to achieve gender equality.<sup>12</sup> She was seminal in creating the Generation Equality campaign spearheaded by UN Women.

### **Feminist organisations in South Africa**

**Agenda Feminist Media** - During the struggle against apartheid, young women started South Africa's first feminist journal in a society where patriarchy was the order of the day. Agenda, the journal became their tool. Through workshops, forums and debates the issue of the position of women in society was firmly put on the political agenda. Democracy and women's rights became two sides of the same coin and mobilized people all over the world to come on board with the struggle against the political system in South Africa.

**Sisonke** is a national movement of sex workers, established in 2003. The movement builds solidarity among sex workers through recruitment for membership and advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa, the recognition of sex work as work, equal access to health services and human rights.

**One-in-nine Campaign** was formed in 2006 as South African collective of organisations and individuals motivated by feminist principles and the desire to live in a society where women are the agents of their own lives. The Campaign supports survivors of sexual violence – those who report the crimes to the police and choose to engage the criminal justice system as well as those who choose not to or are unable to report their rapes. One-in-nine offers feminist political education.



One in Nine offers feminist political education. Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

**South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID)** provide a platform for ongoing dialogue on issues of national, regional, continental and international importance. Through dialogues, they seek to establish a common agenda for the development of women and to ensure that women's views are taken into consideration whenever decisions are taken on all issues that impact on our lives. SAWID emphasise the importance of family as the smallest and most central unit of development for the management of our planet. They work to nurture the eco-system in which women live with insights from African feminism, and to empower women to use their collective knowledge, wisdom and leadership to become the agents of their own development.

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<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/8/news-un-women-bids-farewell-to-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka>

## Role of young women

Africa is a young population. Children under age 15 account for 41% of the population in 2017 and young persons aged 15 to 24 account for an additional 19% representing 60% of Africa's population, making Africa the world's youngest population.<sup>13</sup> Four of the ten countries with youngest populations are in Southern Africa – Angola, DRC, Mozambique and Zambia.<sup>14</sup> However it has some of the oldest leaders.<sup>15</sup> The average age of the ten oldest African leaders is 78.5, compared to 52 for the world's ten most-developed economies.

There is growing recognition of the role that youth can play in governance and political decision making. In a cyber dialogue on young women and political participation in June 2021, during the [Generation Equality Forum](#) young women spoke out about the importance of women participating in politics from an early age.

Sarah Leigh Elago, first got involved in politics through the junior councils in Windhoek, Namibia, and then went on to serve in local government, gave a passionate presentation on a Pan-African Perspective of Leading at Local and Regional levels. She spoke about the persistent barriers that women face, especially young women who come up against traditional beliefs that politics is a man's domain. She has had to overcome a range of barriers in addition her age, including cultural norms, lack of participation and cooperation among youth and women organisations and lack of economic resources . She gave some very practical steps that could be taken to ensure young women's full



participation and to transform women from mere participants and beneficiaries, 1) improve access to resources, 2) effective political mentorship to inspire and support young and aspiring women leaders and to advance the political arena standards for mentorship programmes, 3) provide platforms for young women to dialogue and make contributions to policy debates, 4) regard women as equal partners to the growth of Africa and create 5) and women's networking platforms that include all women not just a small elite, so that women can start pulling together.

## Young women led feminist groups in Africa

As African feminism grows, younger people are active towards being part of the movement. Below are examples of some of the young women led feminist groups and the work they are doing to move African feminist agenda forward.

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables. Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP/248.

<sup>14</sup> Hoe Myers, 19 of the world's 20 youngest countries are in Africa, [We Forum](#), 30 August 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/youngest-populations-africa/>, accessed 25 July 2021

<sup>15</sup> Yinka Adegoke, The world's youngest continent will keep being run by its oldest leaders, [Quartz Africa](#), 28 December 2017, <https://qz.com/africa/1162490/the-youngest-continent-keeps-on-being-run-by-the-oldest-leaders/> accessed 24 July 2021

### ***Women in Tech Madagascar - Madagascar***

Founded in 2016, Women in Tech Madagascar is led by 8 young women from the ICT sector. Their ambition is to help, support, encourage, train and promote passionate women with credentials that will enhance their employment in this sector. They have developed leadership, exchange of technological knowledge, increase in the participation of women in fields such as media and technology and demonstrate that women can master new technologies.

### ***Kusimudzana - Mozambique***

Founded in January 2015, Kusimudzana (which means helping each other) is a nongovernmental organization with the main vision of ending gender based violence in the community and the country, as a whole. Located in Cruzamento de Tete, Villa de Vanduzi, Chimoio, Mozambique, the group's activities include advocacy, information dissemination, life skills trainings, judicial accompaniment, medical accompaniment and psychosocial support among others.

### ***Molao Matters - Botswana***

Molao Matters mission was founded to make law accessible and justice attainable for all. The group believes that the bridge between the law and its subjects can be built by creating portals of access. It can be maintained by challenging attitudes of apathy and stagnation and strengthened through strategic activism. They believe in Gloria Steinem's motto: "Law and justice are not always the same. Destroying the law may be the first step towards changing it".

### ***Her Zimbabwe - Zimbabwe***

Her Zimbabwe envisions a Zimbabwe where women and girls are actively engaged in harnessing the potential of digital based media tools and innovation, for social change. Their mission is to amplify women's voices online, by promoting literacy in digital storytelling and storytelling for advocacy and thought leadership. The group promotes advocacy and thought leadership through strengthening capacity to use digital tools, providing a platform to learn and share feminist ideologies engaging in critical online and offline conversations and knowledge creation and sharing on women's rights and experiences

### ***Tanzania Trans Initiative - Tanzania***

Tanzania Trans Initiative (TTI) established in 2013 is a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to the Transgender community (Trans men, Trans women, Transgender sex worker, Transgender who live with HIV/AIDS) in response to HIV/AIDS and Human Rights Promotion and Advocacy through in depth partnership with the communities in Tanzania. It focuses on advocacy, capacity building, information dissemination to communities and its constituency, awareness raising on various issues that concern TTI's members.

## **Challenging harmful cultural practices**

Culture is an integral part of African women's identity, and they play a central role in preserving tradition and cultural practices and beliefs. While some are beneficial to all members of society, others are harmful to women and girls, such as female genital mutilation (FGM); early marriage and pregnancy and the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility. Steadfast commitment to maintaining cultural practices that



are harmful to women and girls infringes on their rights to live life free from violence, and to realise their full potential. These practices necessitate women, men to challenge harmful cultural practices, which may have been acceptable in the past, but which serve no purpose in a modern society. Culture should not infringe on anyone's ability to realise their human rights. It is essential to interrogate how norms get constructed and what purpose they serve.

Culture is not static. In her [TEDTalk](#) entitled "We should all be feminists" Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says "Culture doesn't make people; people make culture". She talks about her experiences of blatant sexism in her home country Nigeria, where culture and patriarchy remain deeply entrenched. She also locates family as central, but emphasises the family as a space that challenges harmful norms that perpetuate notions that women and girls are inferior to men and boys. She emphasises the importance of how children are raised and challenging stereotypical notions of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Adichie talks about the process of normalisation, in how norms are socially constructed and have been entrenched over time, but which can also change if we start doing things differently. *"If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal."* We have the opportunity to make a new normal.

In her 2014 book, Adichie addresses some of the stereotypes that the term feminism invokes. She helps readers to understand that feminism is about the social, economic and political equality of the sexes. "It demands an annihilation of the gender hierarchy and is not about women's rule over men as is often misinterpreted." While weighed down by negative interpretations, the term feminism recognises that for centuries, a specific group, i.e., women, were being othered and oppressed.

## **Role of men**

There is debate about whether men can be *called* feminists. At two ends of the spectrum - arguments by pro-feminist men that gender should not be a barrier to their full and active participation, others argue that feminism is rooted in women's experiences and the movement founded by women for women's liberation and men have no right to co-opt the name. Despite the label, men do subscribe to feminist ideals - which is a world where women and men have equal rights. There is increasing consensus, especially in Africa about the importance of involving men in the struggle for women's rights and empowerment. It is also disingenuous for any movement for social justice to deliberately exclude supporters of their movement.

As beneficiaries of, and those who uphold patriarchy, men have to be brought along. Men need to be engaged at all levels, as fathers, brothers, husbands, traditional leaders, politicians, faith-based leaders to be advocates for women's equal rights in all spheres of society.

Men can be true allies by understanding their privilege and the ways in which their behaviour and actions perpetuate their dominance in society. They should work *alongside* women rather than *on behalf* of women. They should vehemently oppose harmful cultural practices and beliefs that put women and girls' lives at risk. And they should call out all sexism (subtle and overt) in private and public spaces.

## **Why we still need feminism**

Feminist and women's rights organisations are responsible for the significant gains in advancing women's rights over the last two centuries, however, struggles for political, social, economic and climate justice are far from over. Women are still under-represented in all areas of decision making in public and private spheres; there are still unacceptably high levels of SGBV and in many countries women still do not have autonomy over their bodies and right to make the choices about who they will marry, whether and how many children they will have, and the spacing of these.

In the US the recent overturning of the 1973 court case that gave women the right to choose to have an abortion is a stark example of the growing backlash, from conservative actors and governments, against women's human rights.

### **The future of African feminism**

With the growth of feminist organizations across the continent led by young women, feminism seems to be taking a central presence in digital spaces. Given that many young people today spend majority of their time online, social media and other online platforms provide a useful tool for African feminists to reach multiple audiences. The wide appeal that digital feminism provides will be instrumental in mobilizing for action across many gender-sensitive topics as has evidenced by movements such as #FeesMustFall #MyDressMyChoice and #MenAreTrash. Future African feminism might see a further proliferation of such movements founded on hashtags and translated into massive offline action. The question becomes how to consolidate these online and offline actions into policies that can be adopted by lawmakers and turned into laws and provisions that empower women.

However, with the spread of online feminism, it is also important to remember that there are millions of women across the continent who lack access to ICT services and thus online feminism exclusively might be an area of deepening inequalities. Messages and campaigns against GBV sent through tweets and Facebook posts may not reach women and men without internet access. There is need therefore to conceptualize other innovative ways of getting to such marginalized groups.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Is discomfort with/ rejection of the term 'Feminism' about ideological differences, or is it a matter of language?
2. Is feminism Un-African?
3. What does feminism look like in South and Southern Africa – where do we sit on the spectrum?
4. If not the term *feminism*, then what?
5. What does Feminism look like in the future?

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