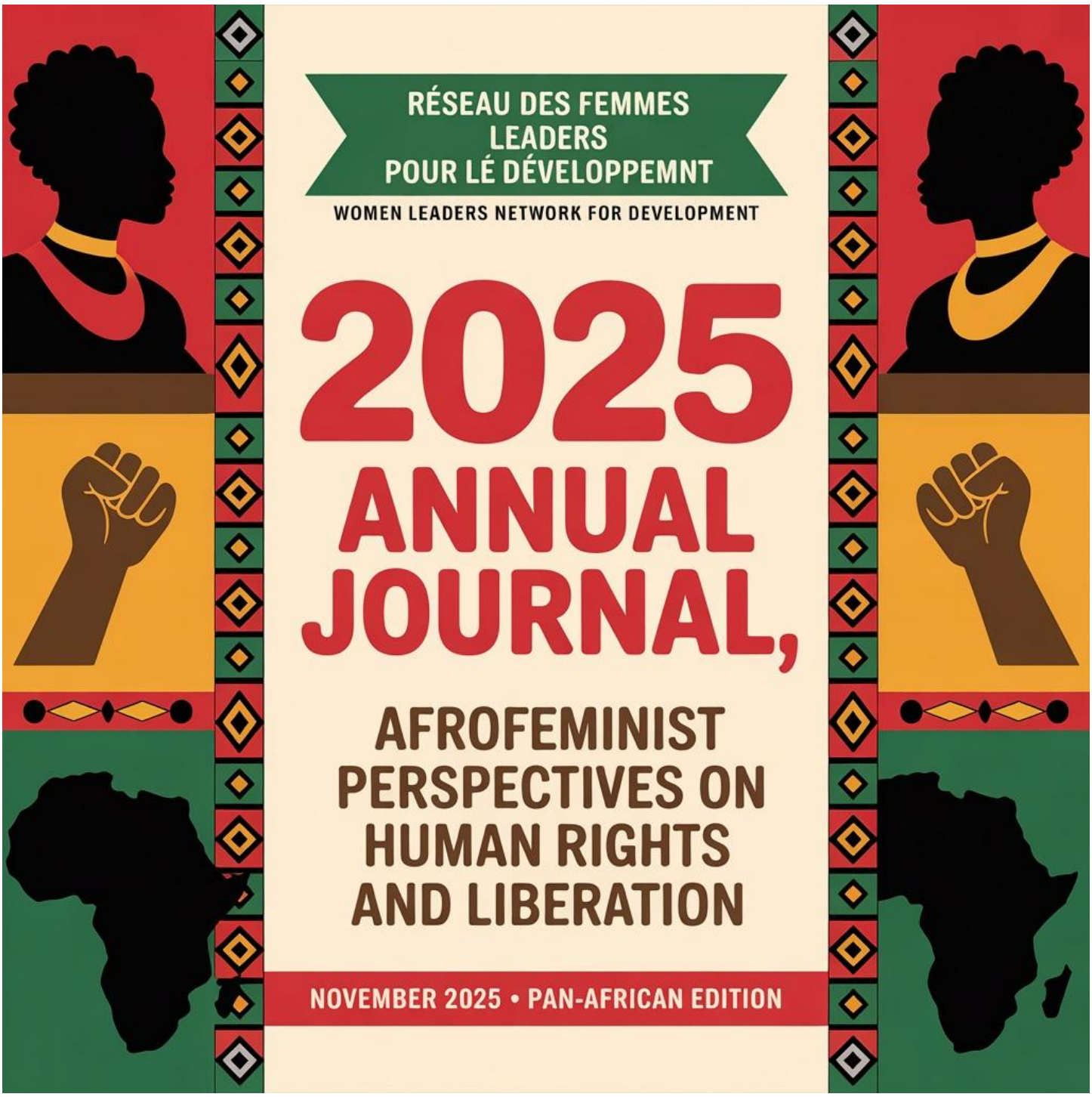
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LEADERS
POUR LÉ DÉVELOPPEMNT
WOMEN LEADERS NETWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT
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DEDICATION

This journal is dedicated to Women Human Rights Defenders across Africa who risk their lives daily to defend human dignity, justice, and liberation. Your courage lights the path forward.

PREFACE

By Mrs. Lucrcece AVAHOUIN – BIOWA President

With deep respect and solidarity, I present this preface for the first RFLD Annual Journal. As a defender, I have directly observed the remarkable bravery and resilience of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) across Africa.

The 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights created a framework to safeguard fundamental freedoms throughout the continent. However, over forty years later, those defending these rights—especially women—face increasing threats, violence, and systematic efforts to silence them. This journal arrives at a crucial juncture when civil society space is shrinking, authoritarianism is rising, and Women Human Rights Defenders are being targeted more frequently for their work.

The data presented in this journal is alarming but not unexpected to those of us working on human rights protection. When three-quarters of Women Human Rights Defenders report threats of physical violence, when detention and judicial harassment are routine intimidation tactics, and online violence becomes an emerging weapon against women activists, it is clear that we are failing collectively to protect those who stand up for human rights.

The ACHPR Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa aim to safeguard the civic space for defenders. Yet, their implementation is inconsistent, and political commitment is often missing.

What makes the plight of Women Human Rights Defenders especially troubling is the gendered nature of their attacks. Women defenders are targeted not only for their human rights work but also because they challenge patriarchal norms. The violence they face is meant to deter their activism and to send a wider message: women should not be in public spaces, should not hold leadership roles, and should not oppose male authority.

Threats of sexual violence, attacks on their families and children, smear campaigns questioning their morality or femininity, online harassment with gendered slurs and sexual threats—these tactics demonstrate that attacks on Women Human Rights Defenders are part of broader gender-based oppression systems.

Women defenders tackling issues viewed as culturally sensitive or morally controversial, such as LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive health, or opposing religious fundamentalism, often face harsh backlash. They are accused of importing "Western values," betraying African traditions, or corrupting youth. Such claims overlook the deep roots of African feminist activism and the agency of African women in shaping their liberation.

International and regional human rights law clearly assigns state responsibility for protecting Human Rights Defenders. Instruments such as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the African Charter, and the Maputo Protocol require states to foster a supportive environment and protect defenders from violence and threats.

However, in many African nations, the state itself perpetrates violations against defenders—through restrictive NGO laws, vague anti-terrorism and cybersecurity policies, bureaucratic hurdles for registration and funding, and arbitrary arrests and detention. These actions intentionally weaken civil society and foster fear.

Even when not perpetrators, governments often lack due diligence in safeguarding defenders from non-state attacks. When women defenders face violence from community members, families, or organized groups, responses are often inadequate—investigations go unmade, culprits go unpunished, and victims are blamed for their activism.

The African Commission's mandate for the Special Rapporteur includes visiting countries, addressing individual cases, and engaging with member states. Its reporting mechanisms allow defenders and civil society to report violations. During ACHPR sessions, defenders share experiences, and states are held accountable. Promotional missions help assess situations directly and foster engagement.

A key strength of RFLD, as seen throughout this journal, is its Pan-African approach. Violations in one country impact the entire continent. Restrictive laws can spread, and initial assaults can inspire attacks elsewhere. Conversely, protections, legal wins, and organizing strategies can be exchanged across borders.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 envisions a united, prosperous, and peaceful Africa driven by its people. This vision cannot be achieved if those advocating for justice, equality, and accountability are silenced. The Africa We Want must include respecting, valuing, and empowering Women Human Rights Defenders.

Regional solidarity also demands African solutions to African problems. While engagement with international mechanisms and global networks is vital, the primary responsibility for protecting defenders rests with African regional bodies, civil society, and the defenders themselves—who must lead in safeguarding their colleagues.

Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders requires comprehensive strategies that operate on multiple levels:

Legal and Policy Reform: Governments should update laws that limit civil society, ensure legislation protects human rights defenders instead of criminalizing them, and develop national action plans dedicated to supporting human rights defenders.

Accountability for Violations: Those responsible for attacks on defenders must be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted. Allowing impunity sends a message that such acts are tolerated.

Institutional Mechanisms: It is essential to establish and adequately fund national human rights institutions, ombuds offices, and specialized protection programs.

Recognition and Legitimacy: The work of defenders needs to be publicly acknowledged and valued by state officials, cultural leaders, and media outlets. Such recognition helps prevent attacks and counters stigmatization.

Resources and Support: Effective protection initiatives depend on adequate funding. Countries should allocate resources to protection funds, while international donors are encouraged to provide flexible, long-term support.

Regional Mechanisms: Agencies like ACHPR need to be strengthened through appropriate funding and political support from member states.

The RFLD Annual Journal makes a significant contribution to African feminist scholars and the documentation of movements. It blends detailed analysis with lived experiences, empirical evidence with theoretical insights, and critique with innovative solutions. The fourteen articles that follow offer an extensive examination of the challenges faced by Women Human Rights Defenders and African feminist movements, while also emphasizing resistance, resilience, and transformation strategies. Topics range from protection mechanisms and funding to political participation, reproductive justice, digital security, and climate justice, addressing the complex issues that shape modern African feminism. Notably, this journal is authored from an Afrofeminist viewpoint that emphasizes African women's agency, analysis, and leadership. It rejects portraying African women as victims needing rescue and instead highlights our power as creators of our own liberation.

To the Women Human Rights Defenders whose stories are featured here: your efforts are meaningful. Every protest you lead, case you pursue, survivor you support, law you challenge, and community you mobilize contributes to shaping the Africa we envision. Your bravery in the face of threats, resilience after attacks, and dedication despite obstacles fuel our collective effort.

To African Union member states: you have both legal and moral obligations to safeguard human rights defenders. Uphold civic freedoms and foster environments that allow defenders to work safely.

To donors and international partners: provide African feminist movements with the necessary resources and flexibility. Trust in African women's leadership and insights.

To RFLD and the authors of this journal: thank you for this essential contribution. May it empower movements, guide strategies, and motivate our ongoing fight for a free, just, and feminist Africa.

Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders is essential—it underpins democracy, development, peace, and human rights throughout Africa. This journal advances that vital goal.

In solidarity,

Mrs. Lucrece AVAHOUIN

BIOWA President

Message from the Executive Director

By Mrs. AGUEH Dossi Sekonnou Gloria - Executive Director, Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (RFLD)

Sisters, comrades, and allies in the fight for liberation,

It is with pride and hope that I introduce this first edition of the RFLD Annual Journal: Afrofeminist Perspectives on Human Rights and Liberation. This publication is more than just a collection of articles—it's a testament to our movement's intellectual strength, analytical depth, and unwavering commitment to the liberation of African women.

For too long, African feminist movements have been overlooked, undervalued, and lacking resources. Others, not ourselves, have often documented our work. Our struggles have been viewed through external lenses rather than our own. Our victories have been co-opted, while our challenges have been exaggerated.

This journal breaks those patterns. Here, African feminists analyze our movements, record our histories, and develop theories of our liberation. We center our voices, experiences, and knowledge production. This is an act of intellectual sovereignty and political self-determination.

We are releasing this journal now because the stakes are higher than ever. Across Africa, civic space is shrinking, authoritarian regimes are rising, and Women Human Rights Defenders face extreme violence. At the same time, anti-gender movements are advancing, economic inequality is worsening, and climate change threatens our communities' survival.

However, within this crisis lies opportunity. African feminist movements are strengthening, becoming more sophisticated, and expanding. We are creating Pan-African networks, developing innovative strategies, and claiming leadership on issues from governance to climate justice. This journal captures that power and potential.

From its inception, RFLD envisioned a world where African women and girls thoroughly enjoy their human rights, participate equally across all sectors, and lead their own liberation. This vision has propelled our growth from a national entity to a Pan-African network spanning the entire continent.

Currently, RFLD's work is structured around seven strategic pillars:

1. Supporting Feminist Movements: Developing resilient, sustainable feminist organizations and networks
2. Combating Shrinking Civic Space: Protecting democratic freedoms and defending human rights defenders
3. Women's Political Participation: Promoting greater female leadership in governance and decision-making roles
4. Women, Peace and Security: Ensuring women participate fully in peace initiatives and conflict prevention
5. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: Supporting bodily autonomy and reproductive justice

6. Economic Justice and Climate Action: Empowering women economically and advancing environmental sustainability

7. Movement Strengthening: Enhancing organizational capacity and feminist leadership development

These pillars have helped us establish a network of 420 member organizations across Africa. This number is more than just a statistic—it signifies 420 spaces where African women organize, advocate, and transform their communities. Supporting the strength and sustainability of these organizations remains central to RFLD's mission.

We recognize that significant change necessitates adequate resources. Historically, African feminist movements have been severely underfunded, receiving only 0.003% of global development funding. This scarcity is a consequence of international power structures rooted in colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

As we expand African feminist influence through our organizing and resource efforts, we also acknowledge the critical role that foundations and state donors from the Global North can have—so long as their support respects our leadership and agency. We call for partnerships rooted in solidarity and respect. The liberation of African women cannot stem from the progress of elite women alone or from gradual reforms that leave patriarchal systems intact. Actual systemic change requires ongoing investment in feminist movements led by and accountable to African women.

This is why RFLD created the Pan-African Feminist Fund—to foster alternative funding approaches that prioritize movement needs over donor interests, emphasize organizing over mere outputs, and support a wide range of feminist activities, including advocacy, mobilization, care, and joy. Throughout this journal, you will encounter Afrofeminist analysis and viewpoints. It’s essential to understand what Afrofeminism represents and its significance. Afrofeminism acknowledges that the oppression of African women is influenced by interconnected systems such as patriarchy, racism, colonialism, capitalism, and heteronormativity. To address gender inequality, these systems must be dismantled collectively, rather than tackled separately.

Afrofeminism centers African women's lived experiences for analysis and strategy. We reject frameworks that portray us as victims or speak about us instead of with us. We assert our agency, honor resistance, and celebrate our power.

It builds on the long history of African women's organizing—from market women's revolts against colonial taxes, to women fighting in liberation struggles, to lawyers challenging discriminatory laws, and healers providing abortion care when criminalized. We are rooted in the fierce foremothers who paved the way. Afrofeminism embraces complexity and contradiction. We reject simple narratives about African culture or women. We critically engage with tradition while rejecting both cultural relativism and imperialist feminism, creating our own syntheses.

Practicing solidarity across differences, Afrofeminism acknowledges that African women are not a monolithic group. Factors like class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, nationality, and language influence our experiences and must be addressed within our movements. Solidarity involves working through these tensions rather than ignoring them.

Afrofeminism calls for transformation, not just inclusion. We are not fighting to join oppressive systems but to change them entirely. We aren't interested in seats at tables built on exploitation; instead, we are creating new tables. The fourteen articles that follow focus on critical issues facing African feminist movements:

Articles 1-3 explore threats to Women Human Rights Defenders: physical violence, online harassment, and shrinking civic space. These articles document the crisis while highlighting strategies for protection and resistance.

Article 4 examines the funding gap that deprives African feminist movements of resources and proposes decolonial alternatives.

Articles 5-6 discuss RFLD's Pan-African organizing model and strategies for transforming women's political participation.

Article 7 emphasizes reproductive justice as essential to women's liberation.

Articles 8-10 analyze interconnected struggles for climate justice, LGBTQI+ rights, and economic empowerment.

Article 11 investigates intergenerational dynamics within feminist movements.

Articles 12-14 evaluate strategic approaches to peace and security, legal reform, and international solidarity.

Together, these articles offer a comprehensive Afrofeminist perspective on current challenges and strategies for the liberation of African women.

An Invitation

This journal is not intended only for academics or experts. It is for everyone dedicated to African women's liberation: activists and organizers, policymakers and donors, researchers and students, journalists and artists, and especially Women Human Rights Defenders on the frontlines.

We encourage you to read critically and engage deeply. Challenge our analysis where you disagree. Build on our arguments where they resonate. Share these articles widely.

Most importantly, we invite you to join the struggle. African women's liberation will not be granted from above or handed down from outside. It will be built through our collective organizing, sustained resistance, and visionary effort leadership. This is the first edition of what we envision as an annual publication. Future editions will continue to document African feminist movements, analyze emerging challenges, showcase innovative strategies, and amplify diverse voices from across the continent.

We welcome submissions from African feminist activists, researchers, and organizers for future editions. This journal belongs to our movements, and its content should reflect the breadth and depth of African feminist thought and practice.

In Gratitude

This journal would not exist without the efforts of many: the researchers who conducted investigations, the writers who crafted these articles, the Women Human Rights Defenders who shared their stories, the editorial board who provided guidance, the designers who created this beautiful publication, and the entire RFLD team whose dedication makes all our work possible.

I am especially grateful to Mrs. Lucrece AVAHOUIN for her powerful preface and his tireless work protecting human rights defenders across Africa. Her solidarity with WHRDs and feminist movements exemplifies the allyship we need from those in positions of power. To our 420 member organizations and the thousands of women activists in RFLD networks: you are the heart of this movement. Your courage, creativity, and commitment inspire everything we do.

The challenges documented in this journal are real and serious. Women Human Rights Defenders face attacks, civic space is shrinking, resources are limited, and opposition is fierce. Yet I close with grounded hope—hope rooted not in naivety but in the proven power of African feminist movements.

The future of Africa is feminist, or it will not be at all. This is not just rhetoric but an acknowledgment that the critical challenges our continent faces—from climate crisis to democratic backsliding, from economic inequality to violent conflict—cannot be addressed without women's full participation and leadership.

This journal contributes to that feminist future. May it strengthen our movements, inform our strategies, and inspire our ongoing struggle.

The fight continues. And we will prevail.

In feminist solidarity,

Mrs. AGUEH Dossi Sekonnou Gloria

Executive Director, RFLD

About RFLD

Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (RFLD) is a pivotal Pan-African organization dedicated to empowering women, youth, and marginalized groups. Our mission is to strengthen communities and advance gender justice, human rights, and civic spaces across Sub-Saharan Africa. We strive to create a more just and equitable world where every individual can fully realize their full potential.

RFLD's core programs drive change at both individual and systemic levels. We strengthen civil society organizations by enhancing their coalition building, resource mobilization, and collective impact. We also empower individuals and communities through education, leadership development, and digital literacy.

- We promote initiatives that advance women's rights, including access to sexual and reproductive health services and participation in decision-making. We also provide direct financial support to grassroots organizations and Women Human Rights Defenders, enabling impactful, community-led projects. We work to protect the rights of women and girls, making sure they have access to sexual and reproductive health services. We also support their active involvement and representation in all areas where decisions are made.

- We stand up for civil liberties and democratic values, with a focus on human rights. This means supporting freedom of expression, assembly, and association, and making sure democratic principles are respected.

- Strengthen the digital, civic, and media environment and ecosystem to withstand threats, backlash, and violence, while promoting human rights and democratic freedoms.

- We subgrant civil society groups to take a more active role in gender justice.

The Women Leaders Network for Development is a Panafrican organisation working to promote and protect the rights of women, youth, and vulnerable groups and ensure their participation in decision-making spheres. RFLD fosters practical cooperation through awareness-raising, training, educational programs, coalition-building, and advocacy, utilizing communication technologies. RFLD represents thousands of Women Human Rights Defenders expanding its reach across sub-regional networks. RFLD brings its expertise to improve collaboration among women human rights organizations, address resource constraints that compromise the safety and security of WHRDs, and build the capacity of defenders to engage with human rights instruments and mechanisms effectively.

INTRODUCTION: AFROFEMINISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

Afrofeminism is more than just applying feminism to Africa; it is a unique political, theoretical, and lived experience stemming from African women's encounters with various intersecting oppressions and their fight for liberation. It draws from African women's resistance to colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and neocolonialism, emphasizing their agency, knowledge, and leadership. It also challenges Western feminist models that overlook or marginalize African women and criticizes African nationalist movements that prioritize other liberation issues over gender justice. The term "Afrofeminism" itself holds political weight. Some African feminists use it to highlight its distinction from Western feminism and its link to Pan-African struggles. Others prefer terms like "African feminism," "womanism," "Stiwanism" (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), or "Nego-feminism" (negotiation feminism) to reflect specific cultural or theoretical perspectives. Still, some claim simply "feminism," asserting that true feminism must be anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and attentive to multiple forms of oppression. These debates go beyond semantics, raising critical questions about relationships with Western feminism, engagement with traditional African patriarchal customs, strategies for change, and visions of liberation. Instead of choosing a single correct term, this journal adopts "Afrofeminism" as a broad framework that encompasses a diverse range of African feminist thought and practice, acknowledging internal differences and ongoing debates.

Afrofeminism fundamentally upholds several key principles:

First, African women are active agents in history, not mere objects. Historically, they have been viewed passively—subject to tradition, poverty, conflict, disease, and oppression—but Afrofeminism emphasizes their agency, resistance, and leadership. It highlights how African women have consistently fought for liberation, formed communities, generated knowledge, and transformed societies despite extreme constraints.

Second, oppressions are interconnected and cannot be separated. Though African women face gender oppression, it intertwines with racism, colonialism, capitalism, neocolonialism, heterosexism, ableism, and other systems of domination. Achieving liberation requires addressing all these systems simultaneously, without prioritizing one over another.

Third, the liberation of African women is tied to broader struggles for freedom. Afrofeminism rejects false choices between combating gender oppression and fighting racism, imperialism, or economic exploitation. True liberation for African women involves transforming all oppressive structures, which includes freeing Africa from neocolonialism and vice versa.

Fourth, African women possess vital knowledge for liberation. They are not just victims or vessels in need of education; they are creators of knowledge, informed by their lived experiences of oppression and resistance. Afrofeminist knowledge challenges Western academic frameworks that exclude African women and patriarchal African systems that silence them.

Fifth, the diversity of African women's experiences calls for an intersectional approach.

Historical Foundations

African women's resistance to oppression predates the term "feminism." Throughout history, women across Africa have challenged patriarchal rules, opposed colonial domination, led rebellions, established organizations, and fought for their rights—even when these efforts weren't labeled as feminist. In pre-colonial Africa, despite the widespread prevalence of patriarchal systems, many women held significant power as political leaders, religious authorities, warriors, traders, and artisans. They controlled resources, influenced community decisions, and held positions of influence. Governance often included women's councils, and economic and spiritual systems recognized female authority. Colonial conquest worsened their status by imposing Victorian gender ideals, restricting women to domestic roles, and erasing their traditional rights through laws and policies. Colonial economic policies also undermined women's financial independence, and mission schools focused on domestic training for girls while preparing boys for leadership. Women were often excluded from politics. Nevertheless, resistance was strong: women warriors fought colonizers, traders organized against economic restrictions, and spiritual leaders challenged colonial rule. Women's organizations emerged to oppose colonial oppression and advocate for women's rights. The 1929 Women's War in Nigeria exemplifies this resistance, with Igbo women protesting colonial taxation and warrant chiefs through mass mobilization. Tens of thousands of women coordinated across large regions, attacking symbols of colonial authority and pushing for policy changes. Though colonial authorities used violence, killing over fifty women, the uprising proved the formidable collective action and political capacity of African women's struggle.

During independence struggles, African women played vital roles, offering intelligence, shelter, and supplies to liberation fighters. They also fought as combatants, organized mass protests, boycotts, and mobilized communities towards independence. However, after independence, male leaders often sidelined women from power and decision-making, claiming women's issues should wait until after national liberation.

Post-independence, women persisted in organizing. During the 1970s and 1980s, economic crises and structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions disproportionately burdened

women. They formed market associations, cooperatives, and mutual aid groups, protesting austerity measures and creating alternatives to failing state services.

The 1985 Nairobi World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women was a pivotal moment for African feminism. Thousands of women from Africa gathered in Kenya to share experiences, build networks, and articulate feminist visions. This conference led to the establishment of pan-African feminist organizations, including the African Women's Development Fund and the African Feminist Forum, as well as numerous national and regional groups.

This history demonstrates that African women's feminist consciousness and activism originated from their own experiences of oppression and resistance, rather than Western influence. While engaging with global movements, African feminism's roots are deeply embedded in the struggles of African women.

Afrofeminism versus Western Feminism: An Approach to Decolonize Feminist Theory

Afrofeminism emerged partly as a response to the limitations and exclusions present in Western feminist movements. These movements historically centered on the experiences of white, middle-class Western women, often marginalizing women of color, colonized women, and women in the Global South. Early Western feminism prioritized issues like suffrage, higher education, and professional opportunities for privileged women, while supporting colonialism and racism. For instance, White suffragists in the U.S. allied with racists, and European feminists backed colonial 'civilizing missions' that oppressed African women, depicting them as victims needing Western rescue.

Second-wave Western feminism's focus on patriarchy as a universal system overlooked how race, class, and colonialism uniquely shape women's experiences. The slogan "sisterhood is global" presumed shared oppression, ignoring how Western women benefit from imperialism while women in colonized regions suffer under it. Campaigns against 'harmful traditional practices' like female genital cutting, early marriage, and polygamy often relied on racist stereotypes, portraying African cultures as barbaric and African women as passive victims. These efforts disregarded historical, cultural, and local perspectives, positioning Western feminists as saviors and Western customs as the norm.

Western feminist theory often applies universal concepts based on Western women's experiences. For instance, liberal feminism's focus on dividing domestic and public spheres doesn't fit African realities, where

economic activities have traditionally occurred within households, and family and community are intertwined with politics. Assumptions about nuclear families and individual autonomy, common in Western contexts, may not be relevant where extended family structures and collective personhood are central.

Afrofeminism addresses these differences by focusing on the experiences, knowledge, and agency of African women. It emphasizes that theory should stem from lived experiences rather than assuming a universal experience of women. It explores how colonialism, racism, and neocolonialism impact African women differently from Western women. It highlights African women's resistance and organizing efforts, rather than portraying them solely as victims. It critically engages with African cultures, without outright rejection or romanticization.

Crucially, Afrofeminism isn't just a critique of Western feminism but aims to develop positive, alternative frameworks. African scholars and activists have produced extensive theoretical work analyzing patriarchy in African contexts, documenting women's histories, theorizing intersectionality from African perspectives, and devising liberation strategies rooted in African realities.

Afrofeminism and African Patriarchy: Questioning "Culture" as a Justification

While critiquing the limitations of Western feminism, Afrofeminism equally challenges African patriarchy and rejects using "culture" and "tradition" to justify women's oppression. Some African men and women oppose feminism by claiming it is a "Western" import incompatible with "African values." They argue that gender equality conflicts with African traditions of complementarity, where women and men have different but supposedly equal roles. They defend harmful practices such as early marriage, widow inheritance, female genital cutting, and son preference as cultural traditions that should be respected. They portray feminism as Western cultural imperialism aimed at destroying African cultures. These arguments serve to uphold male dominance and suppress women's resistance. They essentialize "African culture" as unchanging, homogenous, and patriarchal, while ignoring cultural diversity across Africa, historical shifts in gender relations, and women's resistance to patriarchal practices throughout history. They selectively invoke "tradition," defending practices that benefit men and abandoning those that empower women. Afrofeminism rejects these false choices, insisting that challenging patriarchal practices is not a Western imposition but an African woman's struggle. African women have always resisted oppression. Labeling this resistance as feminist does not make it foreign. Afrofeminism distinguishes between culture as a dynamic, evolving, contested space and "culture" used to silence dissent and sustain power. Cultures encompass both liberating and oppressive elements, and they

continually evolve through internal debates and external influences. No culture is entirely pure or static. Cultural change driven by women's resistance is as authentic as cultural continuity. Therefore, Afrofeminism promotes critical engagement with African cultures—recognizing valuable aspects while challenging harmful practices, uncovering the histories of women erased by patriarchal narratives, and creating new cultural expressions that support liberation. This process requires African women to lead in deciding which practices to retain, modify, or discard, rather than deferring to male authorities or Western perspectives from outsiders.

Pan-African Feminism: Unity Across the Continent and Embracing Regional Differences

Afrofeminism is fundamentally Pan-African, focusing on solidarity among African women across the continent and diaspora, while honoring regional and national differences. Pan-Africanism as a political and cultural movement has traditionally emphasized African unity and resistance to colonialism, racism, and imperialism. However, it has often been male-centric, with women's roles marginalized and gender oppression seen as a distraction from racial liberation. Afrofeminism argues that Pan-Africanism must incorporate gender justice, as the liberation of African women necessitates continental solidarity and cooperation. Oppressive structures—such as patriarchy, capitalism, and neocolonialism—operate across borders, making resistance transnational. Pan-African feminist groups have established networks and movements; for example, the African Feminist Forum connects feminists across the continent to share experiences, analyze issues, and coordinate advocacy.

Intersectionality: Gender Cannot Be Separated from Other Oppressions

Intersectionality—the framework that analyzes how multiple systems of oppression interconnect—is central to Afrofeminism, although African feminists developed intersectional analyses before the term became popular in Western feminist theory.

African women experience gender oppression, but never gender alone. Patriarchy intersects with racism for African women facing racist stereotypes about African women's sexuality, labor, and worth. Colonialism imposed European gender ideologies while extracting African resources and labor. Neocolonialism maintains African dependence and poverty through unfair economic structures. Capitalism exploits African women's paid and unpaid labor. Heterosexism marginalizes LGBTQI+ Africans. Ableism excludes disabled women. Religious fundamentalisms restrict women's rights.

These systems do not simply add together but interact to create distinct experiences. An upper-class Kenyan woman in Nairobi experiences gender differently from a poor rural Malawian woman, though both face

patriarchy. An Algerian woman navigates different manifestations of patriarchy than a South African woman. A lesbian Nigerian woman faces both sexism and homophobia in ways that cannot be separated.

Intersectional analysis reveals how privileging one struggle over others serves those with power. When African nationalism insisted that women wait for gender justice until after national liberation, male elites maintained power. When Western feminism focused only on gender while ignoring racism and imperialism, white Western women maintained privilege. When class struggle dismissed feminism as "bourgeois," working-class women's specific oppressions were ignored.

Liberation requires addressing all oppressions simultaneously. This does not mean every organization addresses everything equally, but all liberation struggles must recognize interconnections and refuse false hierarchies of oppression.

Economic Justice and Afrofeminism: Challenging Capitalism and Neocolonialism

Afrofeminism emphasizes that gender justice is linked to economic justice, calling for resistance against capitalism and neocolonialism. African women carry most of the agricultural labor that feeds the continent and the world, but remain among the poorest globally. They work in informal sectors without labor protections or social security, and often bear the burden of household survival when men are unemployed. Their unpaid care work—encompassing tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare—subsidizes capitalism by reproducing the labor force without compensation.

Colonial capitalism created extractive economies that exported raw materials and imported finished goods, establishing lasting structural dependence. Post-independence, structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and World Bank—policies of privatization, austerity, and trade liberalization—severely impacted African economies, especially harming. women who lost public sector jobs, faced higher costs for health and education, and took on family care without social support.

Today, neocolonialism persists through trade agreements favoring the Global North, debt burdens that drain African resources, land grabs by foreign entities, and climate change—caused by the Global North but devastating to Africa—perpetuating poverty and dependence.

Afrofeminism critiques these systems as intrinsically gendered, exposing how economic exploitation targets African women's labor, paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive. Achieving economic justice entails transforming the fundamental economic structures that exploit African labor and resources. This involves

supporting women's land rights, fair trade, living wages, social protections, recognition of care work, debt forgiveness, reparations for colonialism and slavery, climate justice, and ensuring democratic control of economies.

Violence Against Women: From Individual Acts to Structural Violence

Afrofeminism analyzes violence against women not just as individual acts by individual perpetrators but as systematic and structural, rooted in patriarchy and other oppressive systems.

Violence against women takes many forms: domestic violence, sexual violence, harmful traditional practices, trafficking, economic violence, political violence against women activists, and structural violence through poverty, lack of healthcare, and denial of rights.

This violence serves to control women, maintain patriarchal power, and punish women who resist. It operates at individual, community, institutional, and structural levels. Individual men commit violence, but communities tolerate or excuse it, institutions fail to protect women or hold perpetrators accountable, and structures create conditions enabling violence.

Afrofeminism connects violence against women to broader systems of violence—colonial violence that terrorized African populations, neocolonial violence maintaining African dependence, state violence against citizens, and militarized violence in conflicts where women face sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Addressing violence requires multiple strategies: supporting survivors, holding perpetrators accountable through justice systems, prevention through education and cultural change, and structural transformation addressing root causes, including patriarchy, poverty, militarism, and cultures of violence.

RFLD's Afrofeminist Approach

The Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (Women Leaders Network for Development) embraces Afrofeminism as a framework for our work across Africa. We recognize that African women's leadership is essential for liberation, transformation, and development. We work to support women's organizing, advocate for women's rights, challenge oppressive structures, and build feminist movements.

Our work is grounded in several commitments flowing from Afrofeminist principles:

Centering African women's leadership and agency. We support African women as leaders of change, not recipients of charity. We support women's organizations, amplify women's voices, and advocate for women's participation in all decision-making processes.

Intersectional analysis and organizing. We address multiple, interconnected forms of oppression affecting African women. Our work spans violence against women, economic justice, political participation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, peace and security, and civic space, recognizing that these are interconnected struggles.

Pan-African solidarity and cooperation. We work with 420 member organizations across Africa, building networks, sharing resources, and coordinating advocacy efforts while respecting national and regional diversity.

Movement building over service delivery. While supporting individual women is essential, we prioritize building collective power for systemic change. We support women's organizing, leadership development, and movement strengthening.

Challenging all oppressive structures. We fight patriarchy while also challenging neocolonialism, capitalism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and other systems oppressing African women.

Combining multiple strategies. We employ a range of strategies, including legal advocacy, policy engagement, community organizing, public education, research and documentation, and movement building—recognizing that transformation requires a multifaceted approach.

This journal presents fourteen articles examining critical issues affecting African women through Afrofeminist lens. These articles analyze violence against women human rights defenders, digital threats, shrinking civic space, funding gaps, political participation, reproductive justice, climate crisis, LGBTQI+ rights, economic justice, intergenerational feminism, peace and security, legal warfare, and international solidarity—all interconnected dimensions of African women's struggles for liberation.

The Road Ahead: Afrofeminism in the 21st Century

As we progress further into the 21st century, Afrofeminism encounters both unique challenges and remarkable opportunities. The digital revolution has opened new avenues for organizations but also introduced risks, such as online violence. Climate change affects African women more severely but also presents opportunities for feminist climate justice efforts. Democratic decline threatens hard-earned rights yet sparks resistance.

Economic crises cause hardship while exposing the failures of capitalism and highlighting the need for alternatives.

Young African feminists build on the legacy of earlier generations while developing innovative analyses and strategies. They leverage social media for mobilization, challenge respectability politics, prioritize queer and transgender liberation, connect local issues to global movements, and refuse false dichotomies between different liberation struggles.

The fourteen articles in this journal explore current struggles and point toward transformative futures. They analyze oppression and celebrate resistance. They document violence and honor survival. They critique systems and build alternatives. They identify problems and propose solutions rooted in the knowledge and leadership of African women.

Afrofeminism is a journey, not a destination—an ongoing fight for liberation that demands patience, persistence, solidarity, and vision. African women have always resisted oppression. The question isn't whether to struggle, but how to do so more effectively, forging movements strong enough to reshape structures and achieve liberated futures. This journal supports that ongoing effort by analyzing, documenting, and imagining alongside African women fighting for liberation across the continent diaspora.

Defending the Defenders: The Crisis Facing Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: The Women Who Dare

In Lagos, a young lawyer receives her third death threat this month. Meanwhile, in Kinshasa, an environmental activist's family home is set on fire. In Nairobi, a women's rights advocate is detained on "terrorism" charges for organizing a peaceful protest. In rural Burkina Faso, community organizers opposing child marriage face ostracism, violence, and police monitoring. These instances are not isolated but illustrate a systematic, gender-based attack on women challenging authority across Africa. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)—including feminists, activists, community organizers, lawyers, journalists, and ordinary citizens fighting for justice—face unprecedented threats in 2025. They operate in an environment where democratic freedoms have declined by 73% since 2015, civic space is rapidly shrinking, and speaking out as a woman can be deadly. Despite this, they continue to organize and resist, transforming communities throughout the continent. This article examines the complex crisis faced by WHRDs in Africa, drawing on data from the RFLD 2025 Women Human Rights Defenders Report, field research from 25 African countries, and the experiences of thousands of women engaged in liberation movements' struggles.

Understanding Women Human Rights Defenders: Who Are They?

Women Human Rights Defenders are not a monolithic group. They are:

- Community organizers are actively mobilizing to oppose land grabs.
- LGBTQI+ activists are advocating for the decriminalization of their identities.
- Health workers are providing safe abortion services.
- Environmental defenders are fighting against extractive industries.
- Young feminists leverage digital platforms to expose corruption.
- Lawyers are defending survivors of gender-based violence.
- Traditional birth attendants champion maternal health initiatives.
- Journalists are reporting on human rights abuses. Peace-builders are working to resolve conflicts.
- Trade unionists are organizing women workers to improve their working conditions.

What unites them is their commitment to challenging systems of oppression—patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and authoritarianism—often at significant personal cost.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights describes Human Rights Defenders broadly as individuals or groups working to promote or defend human rights. However, RFLD's research shows that women defenders encounter distinct and heightened risks compared to men, as they are targeted both for their activism and their gender identity.

The Statistics Tell a Brutal Story

The numbers are staggering and demand urgent attention:

Violence and Threats

Across Africa, 76% of WHRDs report receiving threats of physical violence. Additionally, 83% have encountered online attacks such as doxxing, sexual harassment, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Meanwhile, 42% have faced judicial harassment, including arbitrary arrest, detention, and prosecution under repressive laws.

Intersectional Vulnerability

- Risk levels dramatically rise for certain groups:
- WHRDs advocating for LGBTQ+ rights encounter 3.6 times greater violence risk
- Land rights defenders face 2.8 times increased danger
- Rural activists are 2.3 times more at risk than urban defenders
- 91% report threats also target their families, a gendered form of intimidation rarely faced by male activists

The Civic Space Crisis

Since 2015, civic freedoms across the region have declined by 73%. Of the 42 countries analyzed, 76% have passed laws that specifically restrict civic space and disproportionately affect women activists. Only 4 out of 49 African countries have enacted legislation to protect human rights defenders, and none include explicit provisions addressing the unique needs of women defenders. These statistics, gathered by RFLD in partnership with regional human rights networks, highlight the daily struggles faced by real women dangers.

The Anatomy of Threats: How WHRDs Are Targeted

Understanding how WHRDs are attacked requires examining the intersection of gender-based violence and political repression. The threats are sophisticated, systematic, and specifically designed to silence women's voices.

Physical Violence and Intimidation

Physical attacks on WHRDs manifest in various forms:

Direct Violence: Includes beatings, sexual assault, kidnapping, and murder. The 2025 RFLD report details instances where WHRDs have been physically assaulted by state security forces, hired thugs, family members, and community individuals who perceive their activism as a challenge to traditional gender norms.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Sexual violence is used as a weapon against women defenders as a form of political repression. Threats of rape are frequently reported. In several cases, WHRDs have been sexually assaulted while in police custody—attacks meant not only to cause harm but also to humiliate and silence them.

Attacks on Family: Unlike male activists, WHRDs often face threats directed at their children, parents, and partners. This gender-specific intimidation tactic exploits societal expectations that women should prioritize their family's safety over their activism.

Legal Persecution and Criminalization

Governments across Africa are increasingly weaponizing legal systems against Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs). Countries like Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia have passed laws that severely restrict civil society activities, with cumbersome registration requirements, limits on foreign funding, and provisions for arbitrary organization closures. These laws tend to impact women-led organizations more, as they usually have fewer resources to comply with complex legal processes. Additionally, WHRDs are often charged under vague "terrorism" or "cybercrime" laws for actions such as organizing protests, using social media, or criticizing government policies. Between 2024 and 2025, RFLD recorded over 200 cases of WHRDs being arrested under these statutes across the region. Women defenders, especially those advocating for sexual and reproductive rights or LGBTQI+ issues, also face charges based on colonial-era morality laws, defamation, and religious statutes that criminalize their work advocacy.

Digital Violence: The New Frontier

The digital space has become a primary battleground against WHRDs:

Online Harassment and Abuse: 83% of young WHRDs report experiencing online harassment. This includes:

- Sexualized attacks and rape threats
- Doxxing (publishing private information, including home addresses)
- Coordinated disinformation campaigns
- Impersonation and identity theft
- Non-consensual sharing of intimate images (often fabricated)

A 2025 study found that 58% of African women parliamentarians faced online attacks that directly impacted their participation in politics. For grassroots WHRDs with fewer resources and security protections, the impact is even more severe.

Surveillance and Digital Tracking: Governments and private actors use sophisticated surveillance technologies to monitor WHRDs. WhatsApp groups are infiltrated, phones are hacked using spyware like Pegasus, and location data is tracked to identify protest organizers and meeting participants.

Platform Failures: Social media companies have proven catastrophically inadequate at protecting African WHRDs. Content moderation teams lack regional language expertise, context-specific knowledge, and presence in African time zones. Posts calling for violence against WHRDs often remain online for days or weeks, while WHRDs' own content documenting abuses is frequently removed as "graphic content."

Economic Pressure and Resource Strangulation

Many WHRDs face economic warfare designed to make activism financially unsustainable:

Job Loss: Employers, facing government pressure or sharing patriarchal views, fire women for their activism. Professional licenses (for lawyers, healthcare workers, journalists) are revoked.

Funding Restrictions: Laws limiting foreign funding and requiring government approval for grants make it nearly impossible for women-led organizations to sustain operations.

Bank Account Freezes: Several countries have frozen organizational and personal bank accounts of WHRDs under investigation, leaving them unable to pay for legal defense, medical care, or basic needs.

The Funding Gap: Perhaps most insidiously, the global aid architecture systematically underfunds African feminist movements. Less than 0.003% of international funding reaches women-led CSOs in Africa. This resource starvation makes WHRDs vulnerable to all other threats—they cannot afford security, legal representation, mental health care, or even temporary relocation when facing danger.

Social and Cultural Attacks

WHRDs face intense social pressure rooted in patriarchal norms:

Character Assassination: Women activists are portrayed as "bad mothers," "prostitutes," "Western agents," or "traitors to African culture." These attacks weaponize gender stereotypes to delegitimize their work.

Family and Community Rejection: Many WHRDs are ostracized by family members who view their activism as bringing shame. Community leaders may publicly denounce them, and religious authorities may issue fatwas or declarations condemning their work.

Exclusion from Decision-Making: Despite their expertise and community knowledge, WHRDs are systematically excluded from formal peace negotiations, policy dialogues, and development planning processes dominated by men.

Why Now? The Context of Crisis

The intensification of threats against WHRDs is not coincidental. It reflects broader regional and global trends:

Democratic Backsliding

Democracy is in retreat across Africa. The 2024 Freedom House report documented a 12% decline in democratic indicators over the past five years, with only eight countries showing improvement in civil liberties and electoral integrity.

Military coups have proliferated (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Sudan). Even in ostensibly democratic countries, authoritarian practices intensify: media censorship, opposition suppression, and deployment of state violence against protesters.

Women are often the first targets when authoritarianism rises. Feminist movements challenge the patriarchal foundations of authoritarian power, making them particularly threatening to regimes built on masculinist notions of strength and control.

The Resurgence of Religious Fundamentalism

Across the region, conservative religious movements—both Christian and Islamic—have gained political power and actively target WHRDs, particularly those working on sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and women's autonomy.

These movements frame women's rights as "Western impositions" and weaponize anti-colonial rhetoric to oppose gender equality. The bitter irony: they defend patriarchal structures that were themselves often imposed or intensified during colonialism.

Economic Crisis and Resource Competition

Economic pressures—debt burdens, inflation, climate shocks, and the COVID-19 aftermath—have intensified competition for scarce resources. Women defenders challenging extractive industries, land grabs, and corrupt distribution of resources threaten powerful economic interests willing to use violence to protect profits.

The Global Closing of Civic Space

The crisis in Africa mirrors global trends. According to CIVICUS Monitor (https://monitor.civicus.org), only 3% of the world's population lives in countries with "open" civic space. The tactics used against African WHRDs—restrictive NGO laws, digital surveillance, weaponized terrorism charges—are part of a global authoritarian playbook.

The Psychological Toll: Trauma, Burnout, and Resilience

Behind every statistic is a human being carrying immense psychological burden.

The Mental Health Crisis Among WHRDs

RFLD's research reveals a mental health crisis within activist communities:

- Chronic stress and anxiety from constant threats
- Post-traumatic stress disorder following attacks, arrest, or witnessing violence
- Depression resulting from sustained pressure and isolation
- Burnout from working in under-resourced movements while managing security threats
- Vicarious trauma from supporting survivors and witnessing community suffering
- Survivor's guilt when colleagues are attacked or killed

> **One Kenyan WHRD interviewed for the RFLD report described it: "You wake up, check if your colleagues are alive, scroll through news of violence, respond to emergency WhatsApp messages, prepare for a protest knowing you might be arrested, come home to death threats in your email, and try to sleep knowing tomorrow will be the same. Your body never stops being in crisis mode."**

Barriers to Mental Health Support

WHRDs face multiple barriers accessing mental health care:

Stigma: In many African contexts, mental health challenges carry significant stigma. Admitting psychological struggle can be seen as weakness, making activists reluctant to seek help.

Lack of Culturally Appropriate Services: Western therapeutic models often fail to address the specific traumas of political persecution, cultural contexts of healing, or spiritual dimensions of resilience that many African WHRDs draw upon.

Cost: Mental health services are expensive and rarely covered by the minimal budgets of activist organizations.

Time: WHRDs working in crisis mode rarely have time for therapy or self-care.

Security Concerns: Sharing details of activism with mental health providers (who may be required to report to authorities) poses security risks.

Community Care and Collective Healing

In response, African feminist movements have pioneered models of collective care:

Peer Support Networks: WHRDs create circles where they can safely share struggles, validate each other's experiences, and provide mutual support without judgment.

Movement Retreats: Organizations like RFLD facilitate safe-space retreats where WHRDs can rest, heal, and connect away from the frontlines.

Healing Justice Practices: Integration of traditional African healing practices, spirituality, art, music, and body-based healing alongside conventional therapy.

Sister Sanctuary Initiative: RFLD's program has supported over 1,450 WHRDs with mental health services, resulting in a 68% reduction in burnout, according to participant surveys.

Despite these innovations, the scale of need far exceeds available resources.

Case Studies: Stories from the Frontlines

To understand the lived reality of WHRDs, we must hear their stories.

Amina's Story: Climate Justice in Nigeria

Amina (pseudonym) is an environmental defender in Nigeria's Niger Delta, organizing fishing communities—predominantly women—against oil company pollution that has devastated their livelihoods.

Her activism began when her mother died from cancer, which Amina believes resulted from decades of exposure to oil spills contaminating their water. She began documenting pollution, organizing protests, and demanding corporate accountability.

The retaliation was swift. She received anonymous threats. Men in her community, some of whom were employed by oil companies, called her a troublemaker, thereby destroying job opportunities. Her husband faced pressure to "control his wife." When she persisted, thugs attacked her home. She was arrested during a peaceful protest and spent three weeks in detention, where guards sexually assaulted her.

After release, Amina contacted RFLD. We provided:

- Emergency relocation funds to temporarily move to safety
- Psychosocial support for trauma
- Security training in digital safety and risk assessment
- Connection to a regional network of environmental defenders

Today, Amina continues her work, now part of a coordinated regional campaign. As she told RFLD researchers: "They wanted to silence me, but they showed me I was powerful enough to threaten them. I discovered I was not alone. That gave me courage to continue, but smarter, safer, in solidarity with sisters across Africa."

Fatou's Story: LGBTQI+ Rights in Senegal

Fatou (pseudonym) is a queer feminist activist in Senegal, where same-sex relationships are criminalized and LGBTQI+ individuals face severe discrimination and violence.

She runs a small organization providing support services—health information, legal aid, emergency shelter—to LGBTQI+ people, particularly young women navigating hostile family environments and state persecution.

Her work makes her a target from multiple directions:

- Religious leaders have called for her arrest
- Conservative groups organized demonstrations demanding that her organization be shut down
- She has been physically attacked on the street

Online, the harassment is relentless. Fabricated pornographic images with her face are circulated. She receives daily rape and death threats. Her social media accounts have been hacked repeatedly.

Fatou described the impossible choice many LGBTQI+ activists face: "I can hide, be safe, and watch my community suffer. Or I can be visible, help people, and accept that I might be killed. There is no option where I am both safe and true to who I am."

With RFLD's support, Fatou has:

- Received emergency security equipment (secure phone, internet security tools)
- Participated in regional advocacy at the African Commission
- Received mental health support

She continues her work underground, using encrypted communications and frequently changing locations, operating with the knowledge that visibility, essential to her activism, is also what makes her vulnerable.

What's at Stake: Why Defending WHRDs Matters

When WHRDs are silenced, entire communities lose.

WHRDs as Change Agents

Research consistently shows that societies with strong women's movements achieve:

- Better health outcomes (lower maternal mortality, higher vaccination rates)

- Improved education (particularly for girls)
- Stronger democratic institutions
- More equitable economic development
- More effective peace processes
- Better environmental protection

Women defenders are not peripheral to development—they are central to it.

The Canary in the Coal Mine

Attacks on WHRDs signal a broader deterioration in democracy. When governments feel emboldened to silence women activists with impunity, it portends wider repression. Protecting WHRDs protects civic space for everyone.

Intersectional Justice

WHRDs often represent and advocate for the most marginalized: LGBTQI+ people, refugees, sex workers, people with disabilities, rural poor. Their silencing means the complete erasure of these communities from public discourse and policy-making.

Decolonization and Self-Determination

African feminist movements are leading the intellectual and practical work of decolonization—challenging imposed borders, questioning inherited legal systems, reimagining governance, reclaiming Indigenous knowledge, and centering African epistemologies. Their suppression is a neo-colonial project.

The Response: RFLD's Protection Framework

Recognizing the crisis, RFLD has developed a comprehensive protection framework for WHRDs across Africa.

Emergency Response Fund

RFLD's Emergency Response Fund offers quick assistance to WHRDs under immediate threat:

- Response within 48 hours for urgent requests
- Temporary relocation for defenders needing to escape danger
- Emergency medical aid for attacked defenders
- Bail assistance and legal support for those in detention
- Security gear, including secure phones, laptops, and safety tools
- Digital security measures such as VPNs, encryption, and cybersecurity training

Notably, this fund is managed by African feminists who understand local contexts and can make decisions promptly, without the bureaucratic delays typical of international organizations.

Legal Defense Fund

RFLD's Legal Defense Fund offers extensive legal assistance:

- Bail and legal representation for detained WHRDs
- Strategic litigation to contest repressive laws
- Advocacy at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

- National efforts to promote legal reforms safeguarding defenders
- Legal training to empower defenders with knowledge of their rights

Safe Houses and Relocation Network

RFLD operates a network of safe houses throughout the region, offering WHRDs a secure refuge during threats. These safe spaces provide secure accommodation, food, basic necessities, internet access for remote work, psychosocial support, access to local support networks, and guidance for planning their next steps. Managed in collaboration with trusted women-led organizations, these safe houses are run by individuals who understand the unique needs and security challenges faced by WHRDs.

Psychosocial Support Programs

RFLD's wellness programs encompass: individual counseling with trauma-informed therapists, peer support groups led by experienced WHRDs, movement retreats centered on rest and collective healing, burnout prevention training, self-care resources and toolkits, and a crisis hotline for urgent mental health support.

Digital Security and Protection

Given the scope of online threats, RFLD offers: digital security training workshops, one-on-one technical support for securing devices and communications, access to VPNs, encrypted messaging apps, and secure email, social media safety planning, documentation of online attacks for advocacy and legal purposes, and rapid responses to doxxing and online harassment.

Regional Protection Mechanisms

RFLD aims to enhance formal protection mechanisms at both regional and national levels through various efforts: advocacy with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, supporting the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, advocating for legislation to protect WHRDs at the national level, building capacity within National Human Rights Commissions, and providing training for law enforcement on defending human rights defenders.

RFLD holds observer status with the African Commission and is part of the Working Group of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, giving African feminist movements direct access to continental human rights mechanisms.

Solidarity and Network Building

RFLD creates networks that combat isolation through various initiatives: regional gatherings where WHRDs can connect, strategize, and foster solidarity; online platforms for sharing security alerts, resources, and support; mentorship programs linking experienced and emerging defenders; coalition building across diverse movements such as feminist, environmental, labor, and LGBTQI+; and international advocacy that connects African WHRDs with global solidarity.

One WHRD shared with RFLD researchers: "When I faced threats, I felt isolated and scared. Connecting with RFLD made me realize I had sisters across Africa facing similar challenges. We worked out plans together, supported one another, and celebrated our wins. That network turned our fear into strength."

What Needs to Change: A Call to Action

Protecting WHRDs requires action from multiple stakeholders:

Governments Must:

1. Repeal laws that unjustly criminalize legitimate activism.
2. Implement targeted protections for human rights defenders, incorporating gender-sensitive provisions.
3. Investigate and prosecute attacks on WHRDs with the same seriousness as other major crimes.
4. Foster enabling environments for civil society, including accessible registration and funding options.
5. Promote WHRD participation in policymaking, peace talks, and development initiatives.
6. Reform security forces to prioritize protection over persecution of WHRDs.
7. Combat online violence by passing legislation that criminalizes digital gender-based violence.

Regional Bodies Must:

1. Enhance protection measures at the African Commission and regional courts.
2. Track and report on the situations of WHRDs in member states.
3. Hold governments accountable for violations via sanctions and public censure.
4. Offer resources for rapid response and protection initiatives.
5. Guarantee WHRDs access to continental protection mechanisms.

International Donors Must:

1. Significantly boost funding for African women-led organizations.
2. Offer flexible, core funding instead of restrictive project grants.
3. Make application processes simpler and accept proposals in multiple languages.
4. Support emergency funds managed by African feminists.
5. Be willing to take risks when supporting frontline defenders.
6. Fund mental health and wellbeing initiatives, not just specific projects.
7. Tackle language bias in funding, especially the Anglophone bias.
8. Back entire movements, not just individual projects.

Tech Companies Must:

1. Set up content moderation teams in Africa with expertise in local languages.

2. Enhance reporting systems for online gender-based violence.

3. Respond quickly to doxxing, harassment, and threats targeting WHRDs.

4. Cease removing WHRD content that documents abuses, while not removing violent threats.

5. Be transparent about government requests for user data.

6. Offer safety features tailored for at-risk users.

7. Engage with WHRD networks when developing policies.

Civil Society and Movements Must:

1. Promote stronger solidarity among diverse movements and across borders.

2. Integrate intersectionality into coalition-building efforts.

3. Allocate resources and support organizations with fewer resources.

4. Amplify the voices of WHRDs rather than speaking on their behalf.

5. Document and raise awareness about violations against WHRDs.

6. Make protection and wellbeing a fundamental part of movement culture, not an afterthought.

7. Challenge patriarchy within movements and hold founders accountable.

Individuals Can:

1. Amplify the voices of WHRDs on social media and within communities.

2. Contribute to emergency funds and organizations led by women.

3. Sign petitions and join solidarity campaigns.

4. Reach out to your representatives to advocate for the protection of WHRDs.

5. Educate yourself about WHRDs' stories and share them.

6. Confront stereotypes about women's roles in activism.

7. Participate in local feminist initiatives in your area.

The Stakes Have Never Been Higher

The crisis faced by Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa threatens democracy, justice, and human dignity across the continent. However, this is not a narrative of victimhood but one of resistance, resilience, and revolutionary bravery. Every day, women in 25 African countries risk their safety to organize communities, challenge injustice, demand accountability, and forge alternative futures. They do so fully aware of the risks, yet they persist. They are not seeking saviors—they are calling for solidarity, resources, and space to carry out

their work. As RFLD's motto states: "Transforming Power Structures, Centering Women's Liberation Across Africa." This change is happening—led by African women, grounded in Afrofeminist analysis and practice—and it is unstoppable, despite efforts by those benefiting from existing power. The key question isn't if African feminist movements will keep fighting—they will because they have to. The real question is whether we—governments, donors, civil society, individuals—will support them. History will judge us by our response.

#DefendDefenders #WHRDs #AfricanFeminism #HumanRights #WomensRights #SubSaharanAfrica

Digital Battlegrounds: Online Violence Against African Women Activists

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: When the Violence Goes Viral

She woke up to 347 notifications, initially thinking her post about police brutality had gone viral—indeed it had, but not as she hoped. Instead of support, her inbox was flooded with rape threats. Her photo had been edited into pornographic images shared across various platforms, and her address was published with a call to "teach this feminist a lesson." Her mother, tagged in the posts, received threats too. This is not hypothetical; it is a typical Tuesday for women activists across Africa. The digital revolution promised democratization—access to information, platforms for marginalized voices, and tools for organizing. For African women activists, it has achieved this but also has been weaponized to enable a new type of violence at an unprecedented scale and speed. According to RFLD's 2025 report, 83% of young Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Africa have faced online harassment. For women working on controversial issues—LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive justice, political accountability—the percentage nears 100%. This is not mere "trolling" or the "cost of being online." It is systematic, gendered violence aimed at silencing women, driving them from digital spaces, and ultimately excluding their voices from public discourse. This article discusses the digital violence crisis faced by African women activists, highlights the insufficient responses from governments and tech companies, and explores the innovative resistance strategies feminists are using to reclaim digital spaces.

Understanding Digital Violence: Beyond "Cyberbullying"

Digital violence against WHRDs is not random harassment. It is purposeful, coordinated, and explicitly tied to their activism.

Defining Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

The Association for Progressive Communications defines technology-facilitated gender-based violence as "acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies." For African WHRDs, this manifests as:

1. Sexual Harassment and Abuse

- Rape and Death Threats: Most WHRDs face explicit threats of sexual violence; these are detailed, often referencing the activist's location or daily routine.

- Sexualized Attacks: Women are targeted for their gender, appearance, and sexuality, often through body shaming, slut-shaming, or questioning their worth.

- Non-Consensual Intimate Images: Sharing of real or fake intimate images without consent, facilitated by deepfake technology, which can involve placing activists' faces on pornographic content circulating widely.

A Kenyan feminist organizer recounted: "They sent me a deepfake video of 'me' performing sex acts. It looked real. My family and community saw it. I could say it was fake, but the shame and trauma felt real—the point was to humiliate and violate me."

2. Doxxing and Privacy Violations

- Publishing private information like home addresses and calling for violence.

- Sharing phone numbers, leading to harassment calls and texts.

- Exposing family details such as names, photos, workplaces of partners, children, and parents.

- Real-time location tracking through social media posts.

- Exposing financial data, including bank accounts and donor info.

The aim is twofold: to facilitate physical harm and to erode a person's sense of safety and privacy.

3. Coordinated Disinformation Campaigns

Women activists face advanced disinformation efforts:

Character Assassination: False stories depict WHRDs as corrupt, immoral, foreign agents, or bad mothers. These campaigns exploit cultural values—claims like "she abandoned her children," "she's sleeping with donors," or "she's a Western puppet."

Manipulation and Impersonation: Fake accounts impersonate WHRDs to spread false info, make offensive remarks, or contact their networks with scam requests, damaging credibility and relationships.

Strategic Amplification: State actors, political groups, and organized conservative entities use bot networks and coordinated harassment to boost anti-WHRD content, creating the illusion of widespread organic support.

Research by Amnesty International shows these campaigns follow predictable patterns: a WHRD posts something threatening to power structures → organized accounts flood replies with attacks → mainstream media picks up the "controversy" → the narrative shifts from the original issue to the WHRD's "controversial" behavior.

4. Surveillance and Monitoring

Digital surveillance is common:

Government Surveillance: Security agencies monitor WHRDs' online activities, infiltrate encrypted group chats, use spyware like Pegasus to access phones remotely, and track locations through phone data.

Corporate Surveillance: Tech firms collect large amounts of user data, including that of activists, which can be accessed by governments via legal requests or hacking.

Community Surveillance: Suspicious members within activist networks—sometimes state informants—monitor in-group chats on WhatsApp, Signal, and other online spaces.

Stalking: Harassers obsessively follow WHRDs online, screenshot posts, track movements, and compile dossiers for harassment or to share with authorities.

A South African WHRD described the paranoia: "You start self-censoring everything. You wonder if your own phone is listening to you. You suspect everyone in your Signal group might be an informant. The surveillance—real or imaginary—becomes a form of psychological torture."

5. Platform-Based Suppression

Digital violence includes how platforms silence WHRDs:

Content Removal: Platforms delete WHRDs' reports of human rights abuses, labeling them "graphic violence" or "hate speech," while allowing threats against WHRDs to remain.

Account Suspension: WHRDs reporting harassment often find their accounts suspended, sometimes due to coordinated mass-reporting by harassers.

Algorithmic Suppression: Algorithms reduce the visibility of WHRD content, limiting its reach, while boosting sensationalist attacks against them.

Shadow Banning: WHRDs suspect they are shadow-banned—making their content invisible to most users—but platforms keep moderation decisions opaque.

6. Economic Attacks

Digital violence also causes economic harm:

Crowdfunding Platform Bans: Platforms freeze fundraising campaigns after coordinated complaint campaigns.

Payment Processor Blocks: Services like PayPal, Stripe, and mobile money close accounts linked to WHRD organizations, cutting off funding.

Advertiser Pressure: Harassment campaigns lead advertisers to withdraw support from WHRDs' online work, damaging livelihoods.

The Unique Gendered Nature of Digital Violence

Women are subjected to attacks based on gender, sexuality, and appearance, including rape threats and threats against their families. Studies indicate that online abuse against women tends to be more personal, targeting their bodies, sexuality, and families. It is also more threatening, involving rape and death threats rather than mere criticism, and tends to be more persistent with ongoing campaigns instead of isolated incidents. Additionally, such abuse is more likely to spill offline, with tactics like doxxing used to enable physical violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women highlighted that online violence against women

human rights defenders is distinctly gendered and sexualized, aiming not only to silence but also to humiliate and punish women for defying patriarchal norms.

The Scale of the Crisis: Data from Across Africa

Regional Statistics

RFLD's 2025 study across 25 African nations reveals key insights:

- 83% of young women human rights defenders (WHRDs) faced online harassment.
- 58% of girls in Benin experienced online abuse.
- 58% of female parliamentarians in Africa encountered online attacks.
- 67% of women journalists reported online harassment affecting their work.

Forms:

- Sexual harassment and threats: 76%
- Doxxing: 43%
- Impersonation: 38%
- Non-consensual sharing of images: 31%
- Coordinated disinformation efforts: 29%
- Surveillance and stalking: 54%

Impact:

- 71% feel compelled to self-censor online out of fear.
- 58% have reduced their public activism.
- 43% have considered quitting activism altogether.
- 67% suffer psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, or PTSD.
- 34% face offline repercussions, including job loss, rejection by family, or physical attacks.

Country-Level Patterns

Nigeria: The digital space for activism in Africa is highly active but also hostile toward women. The #EndSARS movement showcased the power and risks of digital activism, as women organizers experienced coordinated attacks, including a false campaign claiming protest leaders embezzled donations.

Uganda: Social media accounts aligned with the government frequently target women activists, especially those criticizing President Museveni or advocating for LGBTQI+ rights. Several women human rights defenders (WHRDs) have been detained based on their social media posts.

South Africa: Online misogyny often overlaps with racism and xenophobia. Black women activists, especially those focusing on gender-based violence and femicide, face persistent harassment. Multiple cases have been reported to police, often without substantial follow-up.

Kenya: Election periods see an increase in online violence targeting women in politics. Female candidates and political commentators experience gendered disinformation campaigns questioning their morals, qualifications, and family lives.

Tanzania: Since the enactment of restrictive online content laws in 2018, WHRDs encounter both state-sponsored digital harassment and prosecution for online speech. Several women have been detained on charges of "cybercrimes."

Ethiopia: During the Tigray conflict, women activists documenting human rights violations faced targeted online attacks, including doxxing that led to physical threats against them and their families.

Marginalized Groups Face Heightened Risks

Digital violence impacts WHRDs across various marginalized groups: LGBTQI+ activists encounter 3.6 times higher online violence rates, including outing campaigns, conversion therapy ads, and threats tied to "morality laws." Young women, being digital natives and highly visible online, experience increased sexualized harassment and image-based abuse. Rural activists, when accessing the internet, face attacks that depict them as uneducated or unqualified to discuss issues. Sex workers' rights advocates suffer severe stigma and targeted attacks, with platforms often removing their content as "adult material." Religious minority activists face harassment linked to religious enforcement, with threats justified by religious texts.

Why Digital Violence Works: The Chilling Effect

The goal of digital violence is not just to attack individual women—it is to create an environment so hostile that all women self-censor, withdraw, or never speak up at all.

The Psychological Impact

Trauma: Online violence inflicts genuine psychological damage. Research indicates victims display PTSD symptoms such as hypervigilance, flashbacks, anxiety, depression, and sleep issues.

Fear: Even WHRDs not directly targeted live in constant fear of possible violence. They observe others and adjust their actions to stay safe.

Exhaustion: The ongoing effort to ensure online safety—checking privacy settings, monitoring mentions, documenting abuse, and reporting (often unhelpfully)—is draining and diverts time from activism.

The Practical Impact

Self-Censorship: 71% of WHRDs avoid posting online by steering clear of certain topics, using softer language, or refraining altogether, effectively achieving attackers' goal of silencing. Reduced Visibility: Many WHRDs switch their accounts to private, adopt pseudonyms, or exit platforms, diminishing their public influence and ability to organize. Diverted Resources: Organizations allocate limited funds to digital security, crisis management, and legal actions instead of focusing on programmatic initiatives. Broken Networks: Online harassment erodes trust among activists. Infiltration, impersonation, and surveillance foster suspicion, leading to fractured networks movements.

The Broader Social Impact

When women are pushed out of digital spaces: • Public discourse becomes male-dominated, causing issues important to women to receive less attention. • Policy-making often excludes women's voices, as politicians and policymakers monitor social media; if women are absent, their concerns go unheard. • The next generation

of women is discouraged, as young women witnessing abuse faced by their predecessors choose not to participate publicly. • Movements become fragmented and fearful, reducing their effectiveness in challenging authority. According to research by the Web Foundation, online violence against women results in an estimated $500 million yearly loss to the global economy, in addition to an immeasurable impact on democracy and human rights.

Who's Behind the Attacks? The Perpetrators

Understanding who perpetrates digital violence is essential to combating it.

State Actors

Many African governments actively employ digital violence as a form of repression:

- Direct Government Agencies: Security services monitor activists, create fake accounts to harass individuals, spread disinformation, and sometimes issue explicit threats.
- Government-Aligned Accounts: "Patriotic" social media personalities who defend the government and attack critics, often with apparent coordination and suspicious amplification.
- State Media: Government-controlled outlets amplify negative narratives about WHRDs, legitimizing attacks.

Examples include:

- Uganda: Government-aligned accounts systematically target opposition politicians and activists, showing signs of coordination.
- Tanzania: The Internet Freedom Coalition documented government-linked campaigns against journalists and activists.
- Rwanda: The government has employed digital surveillance and online campaigns against dissidents, including women activists.

Political Operatives

Political parties and campaigns use digital violence:

- Opposition Silencing: The ruling parties target women from opposition groups, especially during elections.

- Internal Discipline: Within movements, digital attacks are employed to suppress dissenting women or to enforce party discipline.

- Campaign Strategies: Certain campaign tactics openly involve "taking down" women opponents through coordinated online harassment.

Conservative and Fundamentalist Groups

Religious conservative and fundamentalist groups target WHRDs through organized efforts such as mass reporting, harassment campaigns, and disinformation campaigns aimed at women human rights defenders working on reproductive rights, LGBTQI+ rights, or gender equality. These online harassment activities are often presented as defending cultural or religious values against "Western" feminism. Additionally, some campaigns are funded and coordinated by international conservative organizations that specifically target African activists.

Patriarchal Communities and Individuals

Much harassment originates from:

Men's Rights Groups: Organized anti-feminist organizations that systematically target women activists.

Individual Misogynists: Men who harass women activists driven by personal misogyny or anger at women challenging patriarchal norms.

Community Members: Sometimes, the most hurtful harassment comes from individuals within activists' own communities—such as family, neighbors, or acquaintances who know them personally.

Economic Interests

Corporations and economic actors with threatened interests include: Extractive Industries, whose environmental harm is revealed by activists and who respond with online attacks; Corrupt Officials, who retaliate digitally after being exposed or hire others to do so; and Organized Crime groups involved in human trafficking, illegal resource extraction, and similar activities, targeting activists who threaten their operations.

Platform Algorithms and Design

Finally, the platforms themselves contribute to the problem by:

- Design choices that facilitate harassment, such as easy account creation, minimal verification, and default public visibility.

- Algorithmic amplification that favors sensational or controversial content, including attacks on activists.

- Inadequate moderation efforts that fail to properly address harassment reports while over-moderating activist content.

- Profit-driven business models that benefit from engagement, even when that engagement involves harassment.

The Failed Response: Why Current Systems Don't Work

Government Failures

Most African governments have failed to safeguard WHRDs from digital violence, with many acting as perpetrators themselves. Even where laws are in place, enforcement is either absent or targeted selectively. Few countries have legislation specifically addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence; most laws are vague or focus on 'cybercrime,' often criminalizing activists instead of protecting them. When laws do exist, they tend to be poorly enforced—often used to prosecute WHRDs for online speech rather than to shield them. Police officers frequently lack training on digital violence, dismiss it as "not real," blame victims, or refuse investigations. Justice is seldom served: convictions are rare, attackers hide behind anonymity, platforms refuse to share user data, and legal systems lack expertise to prosecute digital crimes.

Platform Failures

Tech companies have failed African WHRDs terribly. Many platforms lack a physical presence in Africa, leaving content moderation to remote teams unfamiliar with local languages, contexts, or politics. Moderation mainly covers English, French, and Arabic, often neglecting local languages where harassment is frequent. Reports of abuse often wait days or weeks, so the harm occurs before action is taken. Activist content documenting human rights abuses is frequently removed as "graphic violence,' while threats against WHRDs are often left untouched. Platforms keep their decision-making processes opaque, preventing accountability or appeals. When they fail to protect users, there are no real consequences. A 2024 Mozilla study revealed that WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok all fall short in safeguarding women from online violence in Africa, with response times averaging 5-7 days for urgent reports.

International Community Failures

International organizations and donors have also failed:

Underfunding: Programs addressing digital safety receive minimal funding compared to the scale of the crisis.

Ineffective Interventions: Many digital safety programs focus on technical tools such as VPNs and encrypted messaging without tackling the structural issues that enable violence.

Platform Accountability Absent: The international community has failed to pressure tech companies to enhance protections for at-risk users.

Unequal Priority: Digital violence is treated as less serious than offline violence, despite evidence of its significant harm.

Fighting Back: WHRD Resistance Strategies

Despite inadequate institutional responses, African WHRDs are pioneering innovative resistance strategies.

Individual Safety Strategies

Digital Security Practices:

- Employing Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and encrypted messaging applications such as Signal and ProtonMail.
- Distinguishing and compartmentalizing personal and activist digital identities.
- Conducting regular reviews and enhancements of privacy configurations.
- Utilizing pseudonyms for activities deemed high-risk.
- Refraining from geo-tagging and sharing precise locations.
- Consistently updating passwords and utilizing password management tools.
- Implementing two-factor authentication across all accounts.

Documentation and Evidence Collection:

- Capturing screenshots of harassment before deletion.
- Maintaining comprehensive logs of all cyber-attacks.
- Preserving metadata, including usernames, timestamps, and URLs.
- Reporting incidents to platforms, acknowledging that, even if ineffective, it creates an administrative record.

- Sharing evidence with networks and organizations providing legal support.

Mental Health and Self-Care:

- Establishing boundaries concerning online interactions.
- Taking periodic digital detoxifications.
- Accessing counseling services and peer support groups.
- Fostering collective care within networks.

Strategic Visibility Decisions:

- Assessing the necessity of visibility versus privacy protections.
- Employing collective accounts instead of personal exposure.
- Rotating roles of public spokespersons to distribute risk.

Collective Resistance Strategies

Solidarity Networks:

- Rapid response networks that mobilize when a WHRD is attacked
- Amplification campaigns that flood supportive messages to drown out harassment
- Reporting brigades that mass-report abusive content to increase platform attention

Documentation and Advocacy:

- Documenting patterns of online violence for advocacy
- Publishing reports exposing government and corporate perpetrators
- Advocacy at regional and international bodies
- Media campaigns raising awareness

Alternative Platforms:

- Building and using feminist-owned digital platforms
- Creating invitation-only spaces for organizing
- Using encrypted tools for sensitive communications

Counter-Narrative Campaigns:

- Creating positive content celebrating WHRDs
- Challenging stereotypes and victim-blaming narratives
- Using humor and creativity to resist harassment

Legal Action:

- Strategic litigation against platforms and perpetrators
- Advocacy for protective legislation
- Using existing laws creatively (defamation, harassment, incitement to violence)

Organizational Support Systems

Organizations like RFLD provide:

Digital Security Training: Workshops and one-on-one support teaching WHRDs to protect themselves online

Rapid Response: Emergency support when WHRDs face acute digital violence crises

Mental Health Support: Counseling and wellness programs addressing trauma from digital violence

Legal Support: Connecting WHRDs with lawyers who can pursue accountability

Documentation: Systematically documenting online violence for advocacy

Advocacy: Lobbying governments and platforms for better protection

Movement-Level Strategies

Feminist Tech Development: African feminists are building alternative tech:

- Feminist digital platforms with built-in protections
- Apps for documenting harassment and violence
- Tools for secure organizing and communication

Coalition Building: Cross-movement coalitions amplify power:

- Feminist movements + digital rights organizations
- Human rights defenders + tech activists
- Regional networks coordinating responses

Research and Knowledge Production: Documenting the crisis to inform better responses

Cultural Change: Challenging the normalization of online violence against women through education, media, and advocacy

What Needs to Change: Policy Recommendations

For African Governments:

1. Enact comprehensive legislation criminalizing technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with clear definitions and substantial penalties

2. Ensure enforcement: Train police, prosecutors, and judges; establish specialized units

3. Protect, not prosecute: Reform cybercrime and online content laws that criminalize activism

4. Provide support services: Fund hotlines, counseling, and legal aid for victims

5. Lead by example: Stop state-sponsored digital violence against WHRDs

6. Ensure WHRD participation in digital policy development

7. Require platform accountability: Regulate platforms to protect users

For Tech Platforms:

1. Establish operational presence in Africa with local language content moderation teams

2. Improve reporting mechanisms: Make reporting easy, quick, and effective

3. Faster response times: Address safety threats within hours, not days

4. Stop over-moderating activist content: Distinguish between documentation of violence and glorification

5. Transparency: Publish data on reports, actions taken, and decision-making processes

6. Consult with WHRDs: Include African WHRDs in policy development and safety feature design

7. Protect anonymity: Resist government demands for user data that would endanger activists

8. Financial accountability: Stop allowing economic attacks through payment platform bans

For the International Community:

1. Increase funding for digital safety programs and WHRD protection

2. Pressure platforms: Use diplomatic and economic leverage to demand accountability

3. Support alternative tech: Fund development of feminist digital infrastructure

4. Include digital rights: Integrate online safety into all gender equality and WHRD protection programming

5. Research and data: Fund research on digital violence to inform evidence-based responses

For Movements and Civil Society:

1. Integrate digital safety: Make it central, not peripheral, to organizational practice

2. Share resources and knowledge: Democratize access to tools and training

3. Build solidarity: Rapid response networks that mobilize when WHRDs are attacked

4. Challenge patriarchy within: Address how our own movements sometimes enable online harm

5. Center most vulnerable: Ensure LGBTQI+ activists, young women, rural activists, and others facing heightened risk are protected

Case Studies: Digital Violence in Action

Case Study 1: #EndSARS and the Targeting of Nigerian Women Organizers

The October 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality demonstrated both the power of digital organizing and the vicious backlash against women activists.

Women played a central role in organizing, fundraising, and amplifying the movement. In response, they faced:

- Coordinated disinformation claiming they embezzled donations
- Doxxing with addresses and phone numbers published
- Sexualized attacks and rape threats
- Bank accounts frozen based on false allegations
- Continued harassment months after the protests ended

Many women organizers went into hiding or left the country. The digital violence succeeded in fragmenting leadership and deterring future organizing.

Case Study 2: Ugandan Women Activists and Government Digital Repression

Ugandan activist Stella Nyanzi, who has used social media to criticize President Museveni, faced:

- Arrest for "cyber harassment" over Facebook posts
- Coordinated online attacks by government-aligned accounts
- Surveillance of her communications
- Threats against her children

Her case illustrates how governments weaponize both digital violence and cybercrime laws to silence women critics.

Case Study 3: South African Feminists' Fight Against Gender-Based Violence Goes Viral—For Wrong Reasons

A South African activist working on femicide shared a powerful post about gender-based violence. It went viral—but brought a wave of harassment:

- Men flooded her comments with victim-blaming
- She received hundreds of rape and death threats
- Her personal photos were stolen and shared pornographically
- Men's rights groups doxxed her

She reported to both the platform and the police. Neither responded meaningfully. She eventually deleted her account, losing her primary means of organization.

Case Study 4: LGBTQI+ Activist Forced to Flee After Online Outing Campaign

A lesbian activist in a country where homosexuality is criminalized was outed online:

- Religious groups published her name, photo, and address
- Local media ran "exposé" stories
- She received threats of violence to "correct" her
- Her landlord evicted her
- She lost her job

RFLD's emergency response fund provided relocation assistance, but she can never return home safely.

The Future: What Digital Spaces Could Be

Imagine digital spaces where:

- Women activists could organize without fear of harassment
- Platforms actually protected users instead of profits
- Harassment was rare and swiftly addressed
- Digital tools empowered rather than endangered movements
- African women's voices were amplified, not silenced

This is possible. It requires:

- Political will from governments to protect citizens online
- Corporate responsibility from platforms prioritizing safety over engagement
- Movement power from feminists demanding change
- Resources directed to the problem at scale, matching the crisis
- Solidarity from everyone recognizing digital violence as a human rights issue

African feminist movements are already building this future through alternative platforms, solidarity networks, advocacy, and resistance.

The Resistance Will Be Digitized

Digital spaces are battlegrounds in the struggle for women's liberation in Africa. Those invested in patriarchy, authoritarianism, and exploitation know that women organizing online threaten their power. So they deploy violence to silence them.

But they will fail.

Because women activists are too strategic, too resilient, and too necessary to be silenced.

Every day, despite the threats, African women use digital tools to:

- Expose corruption and abuse
- Organize protests and campaigns
- Build solidarity across borders
- Educate communities about rights
- Provide support services to survivors
- Celebrate each other's victories
- Imagine and create liberatory futures

Digital violence is real, traumatic, and effective at silencing individual women.

But it will not silence the movement.

As one WHRD told RFLD researchers: "They think if they make it painful enough, we'll stop. But we've been dealing with violence our whole lives. Online violence is just another frontier. And we'll fight on every frontier until we're free."

That is the spirit of African feminist digital resistance.

#DigitalRights #OnlineSafety #WHRDs #AfricanFeminism #TechAccountability #EndOnlineViolence

Shrinking Spaces, Rising Voices: Democratic Backsliding and Feminist Resistance in Africa

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: Democracy in Retreat

The data presents a clear picture: a 73% reduction in civic freedoms across Africa since 2015, with democratic indicators dropping by 12% over the last five years. There have been military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, and Sudan. Additionally, authoritarian regimes are consolidating power in nations that did not fully democratize after independence. Democracy in Africa is not just stagnant but actively retreating. Women, especially feminist activists and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), are at the forefront of both facing attacks and mounting resistance. This is intentional—authoritarian regimes recognize that feminist movements challenge their patriarchal power structures. Women organizing for accountability, public space, and bodily autonomy threaten systems based on hierarchy and masculine control. As a result, authoritarian governments target feminist groups first and most severely. However, African feminists are not merely victims of this decline; they are among the most resilient defenders of civic space. This article explores the shrinking civic space crisis in Africa, its impact on women's movements, and the innovative resistance strategies African feminists employ to safeguard democracy itself.

Understanding Civic Space: What's at Stake

Civic space is the environment that enables citizens to organize, participate, and communicate. It includes:

Freedom of Association: The right to form organizations, join groups, and collaborate toward common goals

Freedom of Expression: The right to speak, write, and communicate ideas without censorship or retaliation

Freedom of Assembly: The right to gather peacefully for protests, meetings, and demonstrations

Access to Information: The right to seek, receive, and share information freely

Participation: The right to engage in decisions affecting one's life and community

These freedoms are not abstract luxuries—they are essential infrastructure for democracy, human rights protection, and development.

When civic space shrinks, citizens cannot hold governments accountable, demand justice, or organize for change. Corruption flourishes. Human rights abuses increase. Marginalized groups are silenced entirely.

The CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks civic space globally, categorizes countries as Open, Narrowed, Obstructed, Repressed, or Closed. As of 2025:

- Only 4% of Africans live in countries rated "Open"
- 35% live under "Narrowed" civic space

- 43% live under "Obstructed" civic space
- 18% live under "Repressed" or "Closed" civic space

This represents dramatic deterioration from a decade ago, when the post-Cold War optimism about African democratization was at its peak.

The Tools of Repression: How Civic Space Is Crushed

Governments don't usually announce "we're becoming authoritarian." Instead, they deploy specific tools that incrementally close civic space while maintaining democratic facades.

1. Restrictive Legislation

NGO Laws: Since 2015, 76% of the 42 countries analyzed by RFLD have enacted laws restricting civil society organizations. These laws:

- Impose burdensome registration requirements
- Require government approval for foreign funding
- Mandate regular re-registration that can be arbitrarily denied
- Allow dissolution of organizations without judicial process
- Criminalize unregistered organizing

Countries including Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and Zambia have enacted such laws, often using nearly identical language—suggesting coordinated authoritarian learning.

These laws hit women-led organizations hardest. With fewer resources, they struggle more with complex registration processes. With greater dependence on foreign funding (since domestic funding discriminates against women's organizations), foreign funding restrictions are existential threats.

Public Order and Assembly Laws: Governments restrict the right to protest through:

- Requiring police permission to assemble (often arbitrarily denied)
- Banning protests in specific areas (often everywhere that matters)
- Criminalizing "unlawful assembly" with vague definitions
- Imposing harsh penalties for organizing "illegal" protests

According to Amnesty International's (https://www.amnesty.org) 2025 Africa report, peaceful protesters were arrested in 28 African countries, with women facing additional charges related to "public indecency" or "disturbing the peace" for actions (like breastfeeding at protests) that male protesters wouldn't face.

Cybercrime and Online Content Laws: Over 20 African countries have passed laws ostensibly targeting online crime but actually criminalizing online expression:

- Vague "false information" or "fake news" provisions
- Criminalization of "insulting" government officials online
- Requirements for platforms to remove content on government demand
- Mandatory data localization allowing government surveillance

These laws specifically target digital activism, where women are increasingly visible and influential.

Anti-Terrorism Laws: Expansive, vague anti-terrorism statutes are weaponized against activists. RFLD documented over 200 cases of WHRDs arrested under terrorism laws for activities like organizing protests, documenting human rights abuses, or criticizing government.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism has repeatedly criticized African governments for misusing terrorism laws (https://www.ohchr.org) to criminalize legitimate dissent.

2. Violence and Intimidation

When laws don't suffice, states deploy violence:

Police Brutality: Security forces routinely use excessive force against peaceful protesters. Teargas, beatings, live ammunition, and sexual violence are documented across the region.

Women protesters face specific gendered violence:

- Sexual harassment and assault by police
- Forced nudity searches at checkpoints
- Threats of rape during detention
- Use of tear gas when children are present (women are more likely to bring children to protests)

Extrajudicial Killings: Human rights defenders, including WHRDs, are murdered with impunity. Front Line Defenders (https://www.frontlinedefenders.org) documented hundreds of killings of defenders in Africa between 2020-2025, with negligible prosecution.

Arbitrary Detention: Activists are arrested without charges, detained for extended periods, denied access to lawyers, and subjected to torture. RFLD's 2025 report found that 42% of WHRDs surveyed had faced arbitrary detention.

Enforced Disappearances: In extreme cases, activists simply vanish—presumably detained, tortured, or killed by state actors who face no accountability.

3. Economic Strangulation

Governments economically attack civil society:

Funding Restrictions: Laws prohibit or severely restrict foreign funding, the primary financial source for most African CSOs. Organizations that violate face fines, closure, or criminal prosecution.

Tax Harassment: Civil society organizations face burdensome tax audits, often resulting in claims of millions owed in back taxes, forcing organizational closure or bankruptcy.

Bank Account Freezes: Governments freeze organizational and personal bank accounts of activists "under investigation," paralyzing operations.

Economic Blacklisting: Activists face difficulty accessing financial services, government contracts, business licenses, or employment in formal sector.

4. Media Censorship and Control

Independent media is essential for civic space, and thus targeted:

Media Closures: Governments shut down media outlets critical of authority, often during election periods.

Licensing Restrictions: Burdensome licensing requirements create barriers to media establishment and operation.

Criminal Prosecution: Journalists face defamation, sedition, or terrorism charges for reporting that embarrasses government.

Economic Pressure: Government advertising withdrawn from critical outlets; tax authorities audit independent media.

Self-Censorship: Intimidation creates climate where journalists self-censor to avoid retaliation.

Women journalists face additional gendered attacks—sexual harassment, threats of rape, character assassination questioning their morality.

5. Divide and Rule Tactics

Governments create divisions within civil society:

Co-optation: Offering positions, funding, or prestige to activists who soften criticism

Creating GONGOs: Government-Organized NGOs that claim to represent civil society while actually advancing state agendas

Pitting Movements Against Each Other: Funding "acceptable" causes while starving "radical" ones; framing women's rights as competing with other priorities

Regionalism and Ethnicity: Exploiting ethnic or regional divisions to fragment movements

6. Normalization and Legitimization

Perhaps most insidiously, governments legitimize repression:

Security Discourse: Framing activism as threatening national security or public order

Sovereignty Rhetoric: Attacking defenders as "Western agents" or "foreign-funded" to undermine legitimacy

Cultural Arguments: Framing women's rights as "un-African" or contrary to religious values

Populism: Authoritarian leaders claiming to represent "the people" against elite activists

Legal Veneer: Using courts and formal processes to provide democratic appearance to authoritarian actions

Why Feminists? The Gendered Nature of Repression

Feminist movements face specific, intensified repression because they challenge multiple power structures simultaneously.

Feminism Challenges Patriarchal State Authority

Authoritarian regimes are built on patriarchal foundations—masculine notions of strength, hierarchical control, and paternal leadership. Women claiming equal power threaten this foundation.

Research shows authoritarian leaders consistently score higher on measures of masculine dominance, militarism, and patriarchal values. From Duterte in the Philippines to Bolsonaro in Brazil to African strongmen, authoritarian governance is explicitly masculinist.

Feminists challenging patriarchy challenge the ideological core of authoritarianism.

Feminism Is Inherently Intersectional

Feminist movements connect issues: gender justice requires economic justice, racial justice, environmental justice, LGBTQI+ rights, peace. This intersectionality threatens multiple elite interests simultaneously.

A woman organizing against land grabs threatens both patriarchy (women claiming land rights) and corporate interests (challenging extraction). A feminist peace activist threatens both militarism and masculine political power. An LGBTQI+ rights defender challenges heterosexist state legitimacy.

Feminism Mobilizes Collective Action

Women organizing collectively is powerful. Women are over 50% of the population. When they organize around shared interests, they represent massive political force.

Governments understand this threat, which is why women's protests (market women strikes, mother's movements, feminist organizing) often trigger disproportionate repression.

Feminism Centers Bodily Autonomy

Authoritarian states seek total control, including over bodies. Feminist movements asserting bodily autonomy—reproductive rights, freedom from violence, sexual autonomy—challenge state control at its most intimate level.

This is why reproductive rights activists often face particularly harsh repression.

Feminism Has International Networks

African feminist movements connect regionally and globally, making them harder to isolate and silence. International attention can protect activists, which governments resent.

This fuels accusations of being "Western agents"—rhetoric designed to delegitimize feminist organizing by framing it as foreign imposition.

Country Case Studies: Closing Space in Action

Ethiopia: From Hope to Repression

Ethiopia's 2018 political opening under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initially expanded civic space dramatically. Exiled dissidents returned. Political prisoners were freed. Media flourished.

Then came the Tigray War.

Civic space collapsed. Journalists documenting war crimes were arrested. Human rights defenders faced terrorism charges. Internet shutdowns prevented documentation of atrocities. Women activists documenting conflict-related sexual violence were targeted with particular intensity—their work threatened military accountability.

The Human Rights Watch 2024 documents systematic targeting of WHRDs in Ethiopia, with several facing terrorism charges for documenting human rights violations.

Tanzania: The Long Shadow of Magufuli

Under President Samia Suluhu Hassan, Tanzania's civic space contracted dramatically. Restrictive NGO laws passed. Opposition rallies were banned and opposition leaders jailed. Media outlets closed. Activists were arbitrarily detained.

Women's rights organizations were particular targets. Organizations working on reproductive health faced accusations of "promoting abortion" (illegal in Tanzania). LGBTQI+ organizations were banned.

Uganda: Decades of Closing Space

Under President Museveni (in power since 1986), Uganda maintains a democratic appearance—elections, parliament, civil society—while systematically constraining actual civic freedom.

Protests require police permission (usually denied). NGOs operate under restrictive regulations. Opposition leaders are routinely arrested. LGBTQI+ activists face particular persecution under colonial-era "anti-homosexuality" laws.

Women activists like Dr. Stella Nyanzi, who has used social media to criticize the government, have been arrested under "cyber harassment" and "obscenity" charges. Her case illustrates how governments weaponize moral discourse against women critics.

Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso: Military Coups and Civic Space

A wave of military coups (Mali 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso 2022, Niger 2023) has brought military governments that quickly restricted civic space:

- Suspension of political parties and civil society activities
- Media censorship and closures
- Bans on protests and demonstrations
- Arrests of activists and journalists

- Severing of relations with international organizations

Women's organizations working on peace and security find themselves sidelined or banned, despite UN Security Council Resolution 1325 mandating women's participation in peace processes.

Cameroon: Linguistic and Regional Dimensions

Cameroon's Anglophone crisis illustrates how closing civic space intersects with regional and linguistic divisions.

Anglophone activists (including many women) demanding federalism or independence have faced extreme repression: mass arrests, killings, internet shutdowns, village burnings.

Women's peace initiatives attempting to mediate between Anglophone separatists and government have been attacked by both sides—government views them as separatist sympathizers; separatists view them as government collaborators.

This illustrates how women activists navigating conflicts face multiple threats in closing civic space contexts.

Zimbabwe: Cyclical Repression

Zimbabwe exemplifies cyclical repression around elections. In pre-election periods, space expands slightly (governments seeking legitimacy). Post-election, space crashes.

Women activists organizing voter registration, election monitoring, or post-election protests face arrests, harassment, and prosecution. The message: democratic participation is tolerated only within state-defined bounds.

The Impact: What We Lose When Civic Space Closes

On Human Rights

When civic space shrinks, human rights violations increase because accountability mechanisms weaken:

- No one documents abuses
- Survivors have nowhere to report
- Media doesn't cover violations
- Civil society can't pressure governments
- International community lacks information

RFLD's research shows direct correlation between civic space constriction and increased violence against women, with gender-based violence rising in contexts where women's rights organizations are restricted.

On Democracy

Civic space is democracy's foundation. Without it:

- Elections lose meaning (can't campaign freely, organize voters, monitor polls)
- Parliaments are rubber stamps (no civil society pressure for accountability)

- Courts become tools of repression (no legal defense networks, public interest litigation)
- Corruption flourishes (no one to investigate and expose)

On Development

Closing civic space undermines development:

Health: Organizations providing health services, advocating for policy, or educating communities face restrictions. This particularly impacts sexual and reproductive health services, often first targeted.

Education: Civil society filling gaps in education delivery is restricted. Advocacy for education policy reforms becomes impossible.

Environment: Environmental defenders challenging extractive industries or advocating for climate action face the highest rates of violence globally.

Economic: Labor organizations, women's economic cooperatives, and anti-corruption activists face repression, allowing exploitation and inequality to deepen.

According to Oxfam research (https://www.oxfam.org), development outcomes consistently worsen when civic space closes, because civil society is essential for effective, equitable development.

On Women Specifically

Women lose disproportionately when civic space closes:

- Women's rights organizations face specific restrictions
- Issues affecting women receive less attention in male-dominated residual civic space
- Women face greater barriers to participating in shrinking political spaces
- Violence against women increases without organizations to provide services and advocacy
- Next generation of women leaders is deterred from activism

On Peace and Security

Closing civic space undermines peace:

- Early warning systems depend on civil society documenting tensions
- Peace processes require civil society participation
- Post-conflict reconciliation needs civil society facilitation
- Preventing violence requires organizations addressing root causes

Studies show peace agreements with civil society participation (including women's organizations) are more sustainable, yet closing civic space systematically excludes these actors.

Resistance: How African Feminists Fight Back

Despite massive challenges, African feminist movements are mounting sophisticated resistance to defend civic space.

1. Strategic Litigation

Feminists use courts to challenge repressive laws:

Constitutional Challenges: Bringing cases arguing restrictive laws violate constitutional rights to association, expression, assembly

Regional Bodies: Appealing to African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, regional courts, and international mechanisms when domestic courts fail

Test Cases: Strategic cases establishing precedents protecting defenders

RFLD has supported over 300 legal cases challenging restrictions on civic space, with significant victories including:

- Overturning restrictive NGO provisions in several countries
- Establishing precedents protecting protest rights
- Winning compensation for activists unlawfully detained

2. Solidarity Networks and Rapid Response

When one activist is attacked, networks mobilize:

Rapid Response: Emergency legal defense, temporary relocation, bail funds, medical care, psychosocial support

Amplification: International attention through media, social media campaigns, diplomatic pressure

Collective Action: Protests, petitions, solidarity statements

RFLD's emergency response fund responds within 48 hours to WHRDs facing threats, providing resources that have literally saved lives.

3. Documentation and Advocacy

Feminists systematically document repression:

Tracking Violations: Monitoring arrests, laws, violence, and restrictions

Publishing Reports: Making repression visible through research and media

Regional Advocacy: Bringing cases to African Commission, UN mechanisms, regional bodies

International Advocacy: Engaging with UN, donors, governments, and media

This documentation is crucial—it makes invisible repression visible, counters government propaganda, and provides evidence for legal and advocacy action.

4. Digital Organizing

Despite online risks, digital tools enable organizing:

Encrypted Communications: Signal, WhatsApp, ProtonMail for secure organizing

Social Media Mobilization: Rapidly mobilizing supporters around issues

Digital Documentation: Recording abuses in real-time

Diaspora Engagement: Connecting with African diasporas for international pressure

While governments attempt digital repression, activists stay one step ahead through digital security practices and innovative use of platforms.

5. Movement Building and Coalition Formation

Feminists build broad coalitions:

Cross-Movement Solidarity: Environmental, labor, faith-based, youth, LGBTQI+, and feminist movements supporting each other

Regional Networks: Transcending national boundaries to build continental solidarity

Intergenerational Organizing: Connecting veteran activists with emerging leaders

Inclusive Coalitions: Centering the most marginalized (rural women, LGBTQI+ people, sex workers, people with disabilities)

These coalitions create power that is harder to repress than isolated movements.

6. Alternative Spaces and Creative Tactics

When formal spaces close, feminists create alternatives:

Cultural Organizing: Using arts, music, theater, and culture for political messaging

Economic Organizing: Building cooperatives and economic alternatives that provide livelihoods independent of state or corporate control

Safe Spaces: Creating physical and digital spaces for organizing outside state surveillance

Private Sector Engagement: Pressuring corporations on labor rights, environmental justice, and gender equality

Underground Organizing: When necessary, operating covertly to survive repression

7. Reframing and Narrative Contestation

Feminists challenge repressive narratives:

Reclaiming "African Values": Countering governments' claims that women's rights are "un-African" by highlighting African feminist traditions, women's historical resistance, and cultural values of justice and Ubuntu

Exposing Hypocrisy: Showing how leaders claiming to defend "sovereignty" accept foreign military aid or economic exploitation

Humanizing Activists: Sharing stories that counter dehumanizing propaganda

Counter-Disinformation: Quickly responding to false narratives with facts

8. International Engagement Without Co-optation

Feminists strategically engage internationally while maintaining autonomy:

Amplifying Visibility: Using international platforms to bring attention to domestic struggles

Accessing Protection Mechanisms: Engaging UN, regional bodies, and diplomatic channels

Fundraising: Accessing international funding while maintaining independence

Building Global Movement: Connecting with global feminist and pro-democracy movements

Critically, this engagement is strategic—using international leverage without accepting international control or framing.

What's Needed: A Multi-Level Response

Defending civic space requires action from multiple actors:

Governments Must:

1. Repeal repressive laws restricting civil society, media, and assembly

2. Investigate and prosecute violence against human rights defenders

3. Create enabling environments through supportive legal and policy frameworks

4. Ensure meaningful participation of civil society, particularly women, in governance

5. Demonstrate commitment to democracy through elections, accountability, and rule of law

Regional Bodies Must:

1. Monitor and report on civic space conditions across continent

2. Hold states accountable through sanctions, public censure, and legal action

3. Strengthen mechanisms like the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

4. Support civil society participation in African Union and regional processes

5. Mandate women's inclusion in all peace and security processes

International Community Must:

1. Make civic space central to diplomacy, aid, and trade relationships

2. Support civil society directly through flexible funding

3. Provide protection for at-risk defenders (asylum, emergency funding, diplomatic engagement)

4. Address root causes including debt, economic exploitation, and militarization

5. Stop double standards that criticize African governments while supporting others equally repressive

Tech Companies Must:

1. Protect activists from digital surveillance and harassment

2. Resist government overreach (data requests, content removal demands, shutdowns)

3. Ensure platform access even during protests or political crises

4. Combat disinformation targeting civil society

5. Operate transparently about government requests and content moderation

Donors Must:

1. Fund civic space defense as priority across all programming

2. Provide flexible, long-term funding not restricted to specific projects

3. Support rapid response mechanisms for defenders at risk

4. Accept risk inherent in supporting frontline activism

5. Shift power by letting African activists lead strategy and decision-making

Movements Must:

1. Build solidarity across issues, movements, and borders

2. Center the most marginalized in analysis and leadership

3. Document and share lessons from resistance

4. Invest in protection and wellbeing of activists

5. Sustain long-term struggle recognizing this fight will span years

Reasons for Hope

Despite grim trends, there are reasons for optimism:

Feminists Are Still Here

After years of intensifying repression, African feminist movements have not disappeared. They've adapted, strengthened, and continued organizing. This resilience matters.

Youth Mobilization

A new generation is politicized and mobilizing—from #EndSARS in Nigeria to Sudan's revolution to Ethiopia's protests. Young women are central to these movements.

Regional Solidarity

Pan-African feminist networks are stronger than ever. RFLD and similar organizations connect activists across borders, enabling mutual support and coordinated action.

International Attention

Closing civic space is increasingly recognized globally as democracy crisis, bringing attention and resources to defenders.

Some Victories

Despite overall backsliding, there have been victories:

- Repressive laws overturned in courts
- Protests forcing policy changes
- Defenders released through pressure campaigns
- Regional mechanisms taking stronger stances on civic space

The Power of Truth

Authoritarian governments' need to justify repression through lies reveals weakness. Truth—documented by civil society—ultimately erodes authoritarian legitimacy.

History Is Long

Democratic backsliding is not linear or permanent. Authoritarian regimes face internal contradictions, economic pressures, and popular resistance. History shows that repression eventually generates its own opposition.

As African feminist scholar Amina Mama writes: "Repression reveals the power of what is being repressed. They fear us because we have the power to change everything."

+ The Fight for Civic Space Is the Fight for Liberation

Defending civic space is not separate from feminist liberation—it is the foundation for it.

Without civic space:

- Women cannot organize collectively
- Sexual and reproductive rights cannot be advocated
- Gender-based violence cannot be challenged
- Women's economic organizing is criminalized
- Women's political participation is suppressed

Every restriction on civic space is a restriction specifically on women's liberation.

Which is exactly why feminists must be—and are—at the forefront of defending democracy in Africa.

RFLD's work protecting WHRDs, supporting civil society, documenting violations, and advocating for policy change is literally defending the space in which all social justice work happens.

When you support RFLD's emergency response fund for a WHRD fleeing arrest, you're not just protecting one activist—you're defending civic space for everyone.

When RFLD takes legal action challenging repressive NGO laws, they're not just protecting women's organizations—they're defending space for labor unions, environmental groups, and youth movements.

When RFLD documents and advocates against closing civic space at the African Commission, they're defending democracy itself.

The shrinking civic space crisis in Africa is real, serious, and threatening to undo decades of democratic gains.

But the feminist resistance is real too—strategic, resilient, and unstoppable.

As one WHRD told RFLD researchers: "They can make it harder. They can make it dangerous. They can even kill some of us. But they cannot kill the movement. Because we are everywhere, we are connected, and we refuse to accept their vision of our future. Our resistance is their nightmare. And we're not going anywhere."

Civic space is shrinking.

But feminist voices are rising.

#CivicSpace #Democracy #AfricanFeminism #RFLD #WHRDs #HumanRights #DefendDefenders

The Funding Gap: Why African Feminist Movements Are Starving for Resources

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: The Resource Injustice

Less than 0.003% of global funding reaches women-led civil society organizations in Africa.

Read that again. 0.003%.

This is not a typo. This is not an exaggeration. This is the documented reality of how global philanthropy and development aid treats African feminist movements.

To put this in perspective: In 2023, global philanthropic giving exceeded $810 billion. Of this, approximately $2.4 billion went to African civil society organizations. Of that $2.4 billion, only about $72 million reached women-led organizations.

Meanwhile, African feminist movements:

- Operate in 25+ countries across the most challenging contexts globally
- Work on issues affecting over 600 million women
- Face death threats, arrests, and violence daily
- Achieve outsized impact with minimal resources
- Form the frontline defense of democracy and human rights across the continent

Yet they operate on survival budgets while international NGOs receive millions to "help" African women—often without meaningful African feminist leadership.

This is not just underfunding. It is a form of structural violence that undermines African women's liberation and perpetuates neo-colonial aid architecture.

This article examines the funding crisis facing African feminist movements, its causes and consequences, and what must change to achieve resource justice.

The Numbers: A Crisis Revealed

The Global Funding Landscape

According to Mama Cash and AWID research:

Global Gender Equality Funding (2020-2022):

- Total official development assistance (ODA): $178 billion annually
- Going to gender equality as principal objective: ~$56 billion (31%)
- Going directly to women's rights organizations: $1.9 billion (1%)

- Going to women's rights organizations in Global South: $680 million (0.4%)
- Going to women's rights organizations in Africa: $72 million (0.04%)

African Feminist Organization Budgets:

- Average annual budget for African women-led CSO: $45,000-$85,000
- 73% of African women's organizations operate on budgets under $100,000/year
- Only 4% have budgets exceeding $500,000/year
- 89% report funding as their primary operational challenge

Project vs. Core Funding:

- 92% of funding to African feminist organizations is project-restricted
- Only 8% is flexible/core funding
- Average grant duration: 12-18 months
- Organizations spend 40-60% of staff time on fundraising and reporting

The Language Barrier: Francophone Exclusion

One of the most egregious inequities is linguistic:

Anglophone Bias in Philanthropy:

- Of 2,450 NGOs funded by MacKenzie Scott's Yield Giving initiative, over 94% were Anglophone
- Major foundations require English-language applications and reporting
- Francophone African organizations, representing 27 countries and over 300 million people, are systematically excluded

As RFLD's 2025 report notes: "This marginalizes Francophone organizations, forcing them to operate with limited resources" despite operating in some of Africa's most challenging contexts (Sahel security crisis, DRC conflict, CAR instability).

The message is clear: If you don't speak English, your movement doesn't matter to global philanthropy.

Where the Money Goes (And Doesn't Go)

International NGO vs. Local Organization Funding:

- Average budget of international NGO operating in Africa: $5-50 million
- Average budget of African women-led organization: $45,000-$85,000
- International NGOs receive 85% of development funding for work in Africa
- Local organizations receive 15%, with women-led organizations receiving a fraction of that

Issue-Based Disparities:

- Reproductive health organizations receive more funding than broader feminist movements
- LGBTQI+ organizations receive least funding despite facing highest risks
- Environmental justice organizations receive minimal gender-specific funding

- Economic justice organizing is chronically underfunded

Geographic Disparities:

- Urban-based organizations receive more funding than rural
- Anglophone countries receive more than Francophone
- "Stable" countries receive more than conflict/post-conflict contexts (where need is greatest)
- Regional organizations receive more than grassroots groups

Identity-Based Disparities:

- Youth-led organizations face age discrimination in funding
- LGBTQI+ organizations face explicit exclusion
- Organizations led by women with disabilities receive negligible funding
- Sex workers' rights organizations are systematically defunded

Why This Matters: The Consequences of Underfunding

1. Survival Mode Undermines Strategic Work

When organizations operate on $45,000 annually:

- Staff work part-time or as volunteers
- No benefits, job security, or retirement plans
- Burnout and turnover are constant
- Strategic planning is impossible—it's crisis management
- Programs are reactive, not proactive

One Kenyan feminist organizer told RFLD: "We can't think five years ahead when we don't know if we'll have funding in six months. We can't build movements when our staff can't pay rent."

2. Talent Loss

Talented African feminists leave movement work because they can't survive on it:

- Move to international NGOs that pay living wages
- Migrate to Global North for economic opportunity
- Take private sector jobs to support families
- Leave activism entirely due to burnout and financial stress

The movement loses institutional knowledge, leadership, and capacity—not because of lack of commitment, but because of lack of resources.

3. Dependency and Mission Drift

When funding is project-restricted, organizations:

- Pursue donor priorities, not community needs

- Create programs based on what's fundable, not what's necessary
- Shift constantly as donor trends change
- Spend enormous time on applications and reports
- Lose organizational mission to donor demands

This is neo-colonialism by another name: Northern donors dictating African feminist priorities.

4. Inability to Protect and Support Activists

RFLD's emergency response fund can only support a fraction of WHRDs who need help because resources are limited:

- Can't provide adequate security equipment
- Can't support long-term relocation when necessary
- Can't provide sustained mental health care
- Can't ensure legal defense for all who need it

Underfunding means some activists who could be protected aren't, because resources don't exist.

5. Reinforcement of Patriarchal Power

When African feminist movements are resource-starved:

- They can't match the resources of patriarchal institutions they challenge
- They can't sustain advocacy campaigns
- They can't provide alternative services or models
- They can't build lasting institutions
- They can't scale successful interventions

Underfunding is a tool maintaining patriarchal power.

6. Innovation and Knowledge Production Stifled

African feminists generate innovative analysis and practice:

- Community-based approaches to GBV prevention
- Cultural organizing strategies
- Digital advocacy tools
- Healing justice models
- Intersectional frameworks

But underfunding means:

- No time or resources to document and share innovations
- No capacity to scale successful models
- No ability to conduct research and knowledge production
- No platforms to amplify African feminist thought

The world loses the knowledge African feminists could produce.

Root Causes: Why the Funding Gap Exists

1. White Supremacy and Racism in Philanthropy

The philanthropy sector is overwhelmingly white, Northern, and male-dominated:

- Foundation boards and leadership are 90%+ white in US/Europe
- Decision-makers have limited understanding of African contexts
- Conscious and unconscious bias favors organizations led by white people or men
- "Cultural fit" and "institutional capacity" criteria systematically disadvantage African organizations

Research by Bridgespan (https://www.bridgespan.org) found that organizations led by people of color receive significantly less funding than white-led organizations doing similar work.

This is structural racism manifest in funding flows.

2. Trust and "Capacity" Narratives

Donors justify underfunding through claims about "capacity":

- "They lack capacity to manage large grants"
- "They don't have sophisticated financial systems"
- "They need capacity building before receiving significant funding"

This is circular logic: We won't fund you because you lack capacity; you lack capacity because we won't fund you.

African feminist organizations manage incredibly complex work with minimal resources—that is capacity. The issue isn't capacity; it's that donors don't trust African women with resources.

3. Risk Aversion

Donors prefer funding "safe" work:

- Established organizations over emerging ones
- International NGOs over local organizations
- Service delivery over advocacy
- Uncontroversial issues over cutting-edge rights work

African feminist movements work on the most challenging issues in the most difficult contexts—by definition high-risk. But donors' risk aversion means they fund international NGOs to do "safe" work rather than supporting movements doing transformative work.

4. Short-Termism and Project Mentality

Development funding is overwhelmingly short-term and project-based:

- 12-18 month grants
- Specific deliverables and indicators
- Complicated applications and reporting

Movement building requires decades, not months. Changing patriarchy is not a "project" with discrete outputs. This funding structure is antithetical to how social change actually works.

5. Overhead Myths

Donors fixate on "overhead" ratios:

- Demanding 80-90% go to "programs"
- Refusing to fund core organizational costs
- Viewing staff salaries, rent, utilities as waste

This forces organizations to:

- Underpay staff
- Operate from unsafe, inadequate spaces
- Lack basic infrastructure (computers, internet, phones)
- Hide actual costs in project budgets

No successful business or government operates this way—why expect it of social justice organizations?

6. Intermediary Capture

Development funding often flows through international intermediaries:

- Northern governments fund Northern NGOs to work in Africa
- Private foundations fund international organizations to "support" local partners
- Multiple intermediaries take administrative cuts
- By the time funding reaches African feminist organizations, it's a fraction of original amount

Example: Former USAID allocates $10 million for gender equality work in Africa. It goes to US-based contractor ($1.5M administrative fee). The contractor subcontracts to international NGO ($2M for their costs). The international NGO "partners" with African organizations, providing $400K total across multiple groups. Each African organization receives $50K to do the actual work.

This is extraction disguised as aid.

7. Patriarchy in the Aid Sector

The development sector is deeply patriarchal:

- Male-dominated leadership (even in gender equality work)
- Preference for male "experts" over female community organizers
- Women's organizations viewed as "special interest" rather than central to development
- Feminist analysis is resisted in favor of "gender mainstreaming" that avoids challenging power

Even when rhetoric supports "gender equality," actual funding flows reveal continued undervaluing of women's movements.

8. Colonial Continuities

Current aid architecture reproduces colonial relationships:

- Northern countries decide priorities for African development
- Northern organizations implement programs in Africa
- Northern researchers study African problems
- Northern activists speak for African women
- Resources flow North-to-South with conditions attached

True decolonization requires shifting resources and power to African organizations—which donors resist.

Case Studies: Underfunding's Real Impact

Case Study 1: WHRD Protection Organization (Pseudonymous)

Organization: Women's rights organization in East Africa protecting WHRDs at risk

Annual Budget: $165,000 (from three small grants)

What They Do:

- Safe house for WHRDs fleeing violence
- Emergency legal defense
- Psychosocial support
- Security training

Impact of Underfunding:

- Safe house can accommodate only 4 women at a time; turned away 37 women in 2024 due to lack of space/resources
- Can't provide legal defense for all who need it; prioritize most severe cases
- Psychosocial counselor works part-time; activists wait months for appointments
- Can't afford secure vehicles; activists use public transport to meetings, creating security risks
- Executive Director volunteers 50% of her time because budget doesn't cover full-time salary

What They Could Do With $500K:

- Expand safe house capacity to 15 women
- Employ full-time legal team
- Provide comprehensive mental health services
- Ensure secure transportation
- Pay staff livable wages
- Expand to two additional cities

- Document and share their model for replication

Case Study 2: Francophone Feminist Network (Pseudonymous)

Organization: Regional feminist network in West Africa (Francophone countries)

Annual Budget: $142,000

What They Do:

- Coordinate advocacy across 2 countries
- Support grassroots organizations
- Produce research and analysis in French
- Organize regional feminist gatherings

Impact of Language-Based Funding Exclusion:

- Can't afford to translate materials to English for international donors
- Excluded from major funding opportunities requiring English applications
- International attention focuses on Anglophone African movements; Francophone work is invisible
- Can't afford professional staff; rely on volunteers
- Limited technology and communications infrastructure
- Regional gatherings happen every 3-4 years instead of annually due to costs

What Would Change With Language-Just Funding:

- Accept applications in French, Arabic, Portuguese, and local languages
- Provide translation support for reporting
- Value Francophone feminist knowledge production
- Enable visibility and influence proportional to their reach

Case Study 3: LGBTQI+ Rights Organization (Pseudonymous)

Organization: LGBTQI+ rights advocacy group in Southern Africa

Annual Budget: $128,000 (one major donor withdrew due to political pressure)

What They Do:

- Legal support for LGBTQI+ people facing discrimination
- Safe spaces and community building
- Advocacy for decriminalization
- Emergency support for people facing violence

Impact of Underfunding:

- Lost office space; now operate from Executive Director's home
- Can't afford secure communication tools; surveillance is constant threat

- Emergency fund can help 2-3 people per month; turn away many more
- Legal cases often go unsupported due to lack of funds
- Staff experience trauma with no access to mental health support
- Advocacy work is minimal; all energy goes to crisis response

What They Could Do With Adequate Funding:

- Secure office space
- Employ full-time staff (currently all volunteers)
- Comprehensive legal defense program
- Robust emergency fund
- Mental health services for community and staff
- Sustained advocacy campaigns
- Build coalition with regional LGBTQI+ movements

What's Working: Alternative Funding Models

Despite the crisis, some innovative funding models show promise:

1. Participatory Grantmaking

Organizations like Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund use participatory models:

- Women's rights activists on grant committees
- Simple applications in multiple languages
- Trust-based processes
- Flexible funding based on organizational needs, not donor restrictions
- Multi-year grants when possible

2. RFLD's Integrated Support Model

RFLD combines multiple funding streams:

- Emergency response fund for WHRDs at risk
- Core organizational support for feminist groups
- Program-specific funding for campaigns
- Capacity strengthening (not as prerequisite for funding, but as accompaniment)

This multi-layered approach addresses immediate crises while building long-term capacity.

3. Community Fundraising and Solidarity Economy

Some movements build alternative funding:

- Local fundraising events
- Solidarity economies (cooperatives, collective businesses)
- Membership models (community members contribute regularly)
- Skills-sharing and resource-pooling between organizations

While this can't replace major funding, it builds local ownership and reduces dependency.

4. Crowdfunding and Digital Giving

Digital platforms enable direct giving:

- Organizations reach individual donors globally
- Bypass institutional intermediaries
- Tell their own stories without donor filters

However, this requires digital infrastructure, time, and visibility that many under-resourced organizations lack.

What Must Change: A Funding Justice Agenda

For Major Funders (Governments, Foundations, UN Agencies):

1. Dramatically Increase Funding Volumes

- Commit minimum 5% of all aid to women's rights organizations (currently <1%)
- Allocate specific percentages to African women-led organizations
- Set targets and publicly report progress

2. Shift to Flexible, Core Funding

- Minimum 50% of grants should be flexible/core funding
- Multi-year grants (minimum 3 years, preferably 5+)
- Reduce reporting requirements
- Trust organizations to determine their own priorities

3. Address Language Justice

- Accept applications in French, Portuguese, Arabic, and major African languages
- Provide translation support
- Employ multilingual program officers
- Value knowledge production in non-English languages

4. Change Risk Calculus

- Recognize that transformative work is inherently high-risk
- Accept that social change is not linear and measurable in traditional ways
- Be willing to fund controversial, cutting-edge rights work
- Share risk with activists rather than demanding they absorb it alone

5. Fund Core Organizational Costs

- Staff salaries at competitive, living wage levels
- Office space, equipment, utilities
- Organizational development and staff wellbeing

- Security and protection
- Mental health and burnout prevention

6. Eliminate Intermediaries

- Fund African organizations directly, not through Northern intermediaries
- If intermediaries are necessary, limit administrative fees to 10% maximum
- Transparent about full funding flow from donor to ultimate recipient

7. Participatory Decision-Making

- Include African feminists on funding committees
- Consult with movements about priorities
- Let organizations shape funding strategies, not just respond to donor-determined priorities
- Regular feedback loops where grantees assess donor performance

8. Address Bias

- Acknowledge white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism in funding practices
- Diversify decision-makers
- Use external audits to identify bias in funding flows
- Set equity targets and publicly report on them

9. Simplify Processes

- Streamline application processes (concept notes, not 50-page proposals)
- Reduce reporting burden
- Accept reports in various formats (video, audio, narrative, not just data tables)
- Eliminate requirements designed for large international NGOs that disadvantage small organizations

10. Build Long-Term Relationships

- Move from transactional grantmaking to partnership
- Provide non-financial support (networks, technical assistance, advocacy)
- Commit to funding for the long-term, not just project cycles
- Support organizations through challenges, not just when they're succeeding

For International NGOs:

1. Shift Power

- Move from "implementing" to resourcing African organizations
- If you work in Africa, ensure African feminist organizations lead strategy and implementation
- Pay African partners equitably (not token "participation" fees)
- Use privilege to amplify African feminist voices, not speak over them

2. Resource Sharing

- Share your fundraising infrastructure with local partners
- Provide core funding to partners, not just project grants
- Ensure indirect costs cover real costs
- Transparent about your own overhead and administrative costs

3. Capacity Sharing (Not "Building")

- Recognize African organizations have capacity; what they lack is resources
- Offer support based on organizations' identified needs, not donor assumptions
- Two-way learning: recognize you have much to learn from African feminists
- Accompany, don't dictate

For African Feminist Movements:

1. Collective Power

- Build regional and continental networks to increase leverage with donors
- Coordinate advocacy for funding justice
- Share information about donors (who's trustworthy, who's exploitative)
- Collective negotiations with funders

2. Document and Speak Out

- Document funding injustices
- Publicly call out problematic donor practices
- Celebrate funders who do it right
- Make the invisible visible

3. Build Alternative Economies

- Where possible, diversify funding beyond traditional donors
- Build solidarity economies and mutual aid
- Creative fundraising engaging communities
- Reduce dependency on Northern funding

4. Set Boundaries

- Say no to funding that compromises mission
- Refuse unfair terms
- Demand equitable treatment
- Build enough collective power to walk away from exploitative relationships

For Individual Donors:

1. Give Directly

- Support organizations like RFLD that fund African feminists directly

- Use platforms connecting donors to African organizations
- Trust African feminists to determine their own priorities

2. Give Unrestricted

- Don't dictate how your donation is used
- Trust organizations know their needs better than you do
- Support core operations, not just programs

3. Give Sustainably

- Recurring monthly donations more valuable than one-time gifts
- Commit for multiple years if possible
- Consider legacy gifts

4. Give Generously

- If you have wealth, recognize it's often accumulated through same systems that oppress African women
- Reparative giving that shifts resources to movements challenging those systems
- Give beyond your comfort zone

5. Use Your Voice

- Advocate with major funders for funding justice
- Call out problematic practices
- Amplify African feminist calls for funding justice

The Path Forward

The funding crisis facing African feminist movements is not inevitable. It is a political choice—a choice to continue neo-colonial aid structures, to undervalue African women's leadership, to prioritize Northern organizations over local movements.

Different choices are possible:

Imagine if African feminist movements had the resources they need:

- RFLD could respond to every WHRD emergency, not just those they can afford
- Every LGBTQI+ organization could operate safely without fear of losing funding
- Rural women's cooperatives could scale their successful models
- Feminist research and knowledge production could flourish
- Organizations could pay staff living wages and prevent burnout
- Movements could plan strategically for decades, not scramble quarter-to-quarter
- The most innovative, cutting-edge rights work could be sustained
- African feminist thought could be globally influential
- Liberation movements could focus on liberation, not survival

This is achievable. The resources exist. What lacks is the political will to shift power and resources to African feminist movements.

Imagine what could be achieved with funding that matches the scale of the work and the courage of the activists.

Funding Justice Is Feminist Justice

The funding gap is not a technical problem requiring better grant applications. It is a political problem requiring shifts in power.

Underfunding African feminist movements is a form of structural violence that perpetuates patriarchy, colonialism, and exploitation.

Funding justice—shifting resources to African feminist movements in ways that respect their autonomy, expertise, and leadership—is essential to:

- Protecting women human rights defenders
- Building sustainable feminist movements
- Achieving gender equality
- Decolonizing aid architecture
- Realizing African women's liberation

Less than 0.003% is not just inadequate—it is an insult.

African women deserve better. African feminist movements deserve better. The world deserves the transformation African feminists are building.

The question is simple: Will donors make different choices?

African feminists will continue their work regardless—they always have. They will organize with or without resources. They will resist with or without support.

But with adequate, flexible, trust-based funding, they could do so much more.

The funding exists. The organizations exist. The strategies work.

What's needed is the political will to shift power and resources.

Support African feminist movements. Demand funding justice.

#FundingJustice #AfricanFeminism #RFLD #PhilanthropyReform #ResourceJustice #Decolonize

Beyond Borders: RFLD's Pan-African Approach to Women's Liberation

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: Feminism Without Borders

When a Women Human Rights Defender (WHRD) in Lagos faces arrest, feminists in Nairobi mobilize. When activists in Dakar organize against gender-based violence, their sisters in Kinshasa amplify. When LGBTQI+ defenders in Kampala need emergency relocation, safe houses across the continent open their doors.

This is Pan-African feminism in practice—not abstract solidarity, but concrete, cross-border organizing that recognizes African women's shared struggles and collective power.

The Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (RFLD)—Women Leaders Network for Development—embodies this Pan-African vision. Operating across 25+ African countries, RFLD builds the regional infrastructure that enables African feminist movements to transcend colonial borders, share resources and strategies, and build continental power.

In an era of rising nationalism and closing borders, RFLD's Pan-African approach is both radical and necessary—recognizing that patriarchy, authoritarianism, and exploitation don't respect borders, so resistance cannot either.

This article examines RFLD's Pan-African model, exploring how cross-border feminist organizing builds power, creates safety, and advances liberation across the continent.

Why Pan-African? The Case for Regional Organizing

1. Colonial Borders Divide Natural Communities

Africa's current borders were drawn by European colonial powers at the 1884 Berlin Conference, carving the continent into territories that served colonial extraction, not African peoples' needs.

These artificial borders:

- Divided ethnic and linguistic communities
- Created arbitrary regional divisions
- Imposed European languages and administrative systems
- Disrupted trade, communication, and kinship networks

Pan-African feminism recognizes these borders as colonial impositions and organizes across them, reconnecting communities colonialism divided.

2. Patriarchy and Authoritarianism Are Regional

The systems oppressing African women operate regionally:

Patriarchy: Cultural practices limiting women's rights (FGM, child marriage, property restrictions) span multiple countries, requiring regional responses.

Authoritarianism: Repressive governments learn from each other, sharing tactics and technologies for suppressing dissent. Activists facing similar repression need regional networks.

Religious Fundamentalism: Conservative movements operate across borders, coordinating campaigns against women's rights. Resistance must be similarly coordinated.

Corporate Extraction: Mining, logging, and agribusiness companies operate across multiple countries. Challenging them requires regional coalitions.

Conflict and Insecurity: Wars and instability spill across borders (DRC-Rwanda-Uganda; Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso). Peace-building requires regional cooperation.

3. Isolation Is Dangerous

WHRDs operating alone in their countries face:

- Greater vulnerability to attack
- Limited resources and capacity
- Psychological isolation and burnout
- Difficulty accessing protection mechanisms
- Lack of alternative perspectives and strategies

Regional networks provide:

- Solidarity and mutual support
- Resource sharing
- Emergency relocation options
- Collective advocacy power
- Learning from others' experiences

4. Learning and Innovation Across Borders

African feminist movements develop innovative strategies worth sharing:

- Community mobilization models from West Africa
- Digital security tactics from East Africa
- Economic organizing from Southern Africa
- Peace-building approaches from Central Africa

Regional networks enable this knowledge exchange, strengthening movements everywhere.

5. Regional Bodies Require Regional Advocacy

African Union, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, regional courts, and sub-regional organizations (ECOWAS, SADC, COMESA, EAC) make decisions affecting women's rights.

Effective advocacy requires regional feminist presence—which individual organizations cannot sustain, but networks like RFLD can.

How Pan-African Organizing Works in Practice

Multi-Level Approach

RFLD operates at three levels simultaneously:

1. Grassroots Level

- Direct support to community-based organizations
- Resources for local activism
- Protection for individual WHRDs
- Community education and mobilization

2. National Level

- Support for national feminist coalitions
- Advocacy with national governments
- National-level campaigns and litigation
- Capacity strengthening for national organizations

3. Regional/Continental Level

- Regional network coordination
- Advocacy at African Union and regional bodies
- Cross-border campaigns
- Regional gatherings and strategy sessions
- Knowledge production and dissemination

This multi-level approach ensures local relevance while building continental power.

Thematic Focus Areas

RFLD's Pan-African work spans seven pillars:

1. Supporting Feminist Movements: Emergency response, legal defense, psychosocial support, safe houses, protection mechanisms for WHRDs

2. Combating Shrinking Civic Space: Defending freedom of association, assembly, expression; strategic litigation; anti-corruption work

3. Women's Political Participation: Quota advocacy, combating political violence, supporting women leaders, gender-responsive budgeting

4. Women, Peace & Security: Conflict prevention, peace mediation, support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence

5. Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights: Safe abortion access, maternal health, ending FGM/C, LGBTQI+ health rights

6. Economic Justice & Climate Action: Labor rights, feminist climate advocacy, economic empowerment

7. Movement Strengthening & Knowledge Production: Intergenerational dialogue, research, cultural activism, institutional strengthening

All work integrates Pan-African perspective—recognizing regional patterns, facilitating cross-border learning, and building continental movements.

Bilingual and Multilingual Operations

RFLD operates in English and French, bridging the linguistic divide that often fragments African organizing.

Materials, workshops, and communications occur in both languages, with translation provided as needed.

This bilingual approach is essential—Francophone Africa represents 27 countries and over 300 million people, yet is often excluded from Anglophone-dominated spaces.

RFLD also works in Portuguese (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe) and major local languages as needed.

RFLD's Pan-African Programs in Action

Emergency Response Fund: Cross-Border Protection

When a WHRD faces immediate danger:

Within 48 hours, RFLD's Emergency Response Fund can provide:

- Temporary relocation (often across borders)
- Emergency medical care
- Bail and legal representation
- Security equipment
- Digital security support

Cross-Border Dimension: WHRDs fleeing danger often cannot stay in their own countries. RFLD's regional network enables:

- Safe houses in multiple countries
- Legal support across jurisdictions
- Understanding of regional political dynamics
- Coordination with authorities in multiple countries

Regional Safe House Network

RFLD maintains safe houses across the region where WHRDs can temporarily relocate when facing threats.

How It Works:

- Network of trusted women-led organizations hosting safe houses
- Secure locations not publicly disclosed
- Access through RFLD coordination
- Basic needs provided (accommodation, food, internet, phone)
- Psychosocial support available
- Planning support for next steps

Pan-African Element: A WHRD from Mali can relocate to Senegal, Ghana, or Benin depending on proximity, visa requirements, language, and available space. Regional network provides options national organizations cannot.

Legal Defense Fund: Cross-Jurisdictional Support

RFLD's Legal Defense Fund provides comprehensive legal support across borders:

Services Include:

- Bail and legal representation for arrested WHRDs
- Strategic litigation challenging repressive laws
- Regional legal advocacy (African Commission, regional courts)
- National advocacy for legal reforms
- Legal training for defenders

Regional Feminist Gatherings

RFLD organizes regular regional gatherings bringing together feminists from across the continent:

Purposes:

- Share strategies and experiences
- Build solidarity and relationships
- Develop coordinated regional campaigns
- Provide rest and healing away from frontlines
- Celebrate victories and honor losses
- Strategic planning for movement

Impact: Participants consistently report that regional gatherings:

- Break isolation
- Provide new strategies and perspectives
- Build trust enabling future collaboration
- Create sense of belonging to continental movement
- Rejuvenate commitment and energy

One participant described it: "For the first time, I understood I wasn't alone. Women across Africa face what I face. We shared stories, cried together, laughed together, strategized together. I left exhausted but not alone—and that changed everything."

African Commission Advocacy

RFLD holds observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and is part of the Working Group of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders.

This provides direct access to continental protection mechanisms:

RFLD's Advocacy Work:

- Submitting shadow reports on women's rights situations in specific countries
- Bringing urgent actions when WHRDs face imminent danger
- Advocating for special attention to WHRDs in the Commission's work
- Supporting WHRDs to engage Commission mechanisms
- Pushing for implementation of African Commission decisions

Regional Impact: Individual organizations struggle to engage with regional bodies consistently. RFLD's sustained presence ensures African feminist perspectives shape continental human rights work.

Knowledge Production and Sharing

RFLD produces research, analysis, and documentation with regional scope:

2025 Women Human Rights Defenders Report: Comprehensive analysis of WHRD situations across 25 countries, identifying regional patterns and coordinated responses

Data Center (Dɔnùesè): Collects gender-disaggregated data across the region, providing evidence for advocacy

Regional Analysis: Regular reports on civic space, women's rights legislation, political participation, SRHR, and other themes

Webinars and Training: Digital platforms enabling knowledge exchange across distances

This regional knowledge production fills a gap, as most research is either country-specific or global, leaving regional patterns and dynamics unaddressed.

Capacity Strengthening

RFLD provides capacity support to feminist organizations across the region:

Training Areas:

- Digital security and protection
- Financial management and sustainability
- Strategic communications
- Advocacy and lobbying

- Organizational development
- Movement building

Regional Approach: Training brings together organizations from multiple countries, enabling peer learning and network building alongside skill development.

Accompaniment Model: RFLD doesn't just train and leave—it provides ongoing support as organizations implement new approaches.

Success Stories: Pan-African Organizing in Practice

Case Study 1: Emergency Relocation Network

Situation: Five WHRDs from Burkina Faso faced immediate danger following a military coup. As women who had criticized the previous government and the new military junta, they received credible death threats.

RFLD Response:

- Within 24 hours, activated regional emergency network
- Arranged temporary relocation to safe houses in Ghana and Benin
- Provided emergency funds for travel, basic needs
- Connected to legal support in both Burkina Faso and host countries
- Facilitated continued remote work on advocacy

Regional Dimension: This required coordination across three countries, an understanding of regional political dynamics, established relationships that enabled rapid responses, and resources to move quickly.

Outcome: All five WHRDs safely relocated, continued advocacy remotely, eventually some returned to Burkina Faso when security improved while others resettled elsewhere.

Case Study 2: Francophone-Anglophone Feminist Dialogue

Situation: Francophone and Anglophone African feminist movements often operate in parallel, limited by language barriers and different colonial legacies.

RFLD Initiative: Created sustained dialogue bringing Francophone and Anglophone feminists together:

Activities:

- Bilingual regional gatherings with professional interpretation
- Translation of key documents and analyses
- Joint campaigns bridging linguistic divide
- Exchange visits between Francophone and Anglophone organizations
- Bilingual digital platforms

Impact:

- Shared strategies (e.g., Francophone community mobilization models influenced Anglophone organizing; Anglophone digital activism strategies adopted by Francophone movements)
- Coordinated advocacy with funders to address Anglophone bias
- Stronger Pan-African feminist identity transcending colonial linguistic divisions
- Personal relationships enabling future collaboration

Participant Reflection: "I had worked in feminist movements for 15 years, but only with Anglophone organizations. RFLD gatherings introduced me to incredible Francophone feminist work that I had never known existed. We face the same patriarchy; we should face it together."

Borders Are Not Barriers

Colonial powers carved Africa into pieces to facilitate extraction and control.

Pan-African feminism refuses that fragmentation.

RFLD's work demonstrates that borders—while real in their effects—need not be barriers to solidarity, mutual support, and collective power.

When a WHRD in danger finds safety across a border, when activists share strategies across linguistic divides, when regional campaigns challenge continental patterns of oppression, when movements build power transcending nation-states—Pan-African feminism materializes.

This is not abstract ideology. Practical organizing saves lives, builds power, and advances liberation.

As RFLD's work shows, Pan-African feminism is not just possible—it is necessary.

Because patriarchy doesn't respect borders.

Neither should our resistance.

#PanAfricanFeminism #RFLD #BorderlessResistance #AfricanFeminism #RegionalOrganizing

From Grassroots to Government: Women's Political Participation in Africa

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: The Power Gap

Across Africa, women make up over 50% of the population. They grow the majority of food, perform most care work, lead community organizations, and drive social movements. Yet they hold only 25% of parliamentary seats and occupy far fewer positions in executive government, judiciary, and local councils.

This is not coincidence. It is the result of systematic exclusion, violence, discrimination, and patriarchal structures designed to keep political power in men's hands.

But African women refuse to accept this status quo. From grassroots organizing to cabinet positions, from village councils to presidential campaigns, women are claiming political space, transforming governance, and redefining what leadership looks like.

The Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (RFLD) works at every level of this struggle—supporting women candidates, combating political violence, advocating for quotas, training women leaders, and ensuring that women's political participation is not just symbolic but transformative.

This article examines the state of women's political participation across Africa, the barriers women face, the strategies advancing women's representation, and RFLD's comprehensive approach to political empowerment.

The Current Landscape: Progress and Persistent Gaps

Regional Overview

Africa has made significant strides in women's political representation over the past three decades:

Parliamentary Representation (2025):

- Regional average: 25% of parliamentary seats held by women
- Rwanda leads globally with 61% women in parliament

Executive Leadership:

- Women hold approximately 20% of ministerial positions across the region
- Women prime ministers and vice presidents remain rare
- Local government representation varies widely, generally below 30%

Judicial and Constitutional Bodies:

- Women constitute approximately 25-35% of high court judges across the region
- Several countries have women Chief Justices

- Constitutional courts show similar or slightly higher percentages
- Electoral commissions increasingly include women, though rarely in leadership

Progress Drivers

Several factors have driven increases in women's political representation:

1. Gender Quotas: Countries with constitutional or legislative quotas show significantly higher representation.

2. Women's Movements: Decades of feminist organizing have shifted public opinion and created political pressure.

3. International Frameworks: SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (50% target), AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, Beijing Platform for Action create regional and international accountability.

4. Post-Conflict Transitions: Some post-conflict contexts (Rwanda, Liberia) prioritized women's inclusion in rebuilding governance.

5. Democratic Openings: Transitions to multi-party democracy created opportunities for women candidates.

6. Women's Organizations: Training, mentorship, and support from organizations like RFLD have prepared thousands of women for political leadership.

Persistent Challenges

Despite progress, formidable barriers remain:

Structural:

- Male-dominated political parties control candidate selection
- Electoral systems favor incumbents (overwhelmingly male)
- Campaign financing requirements disadvantage women (who have less access to wealth)
- Informal networks and "old boys' clubs" exclude women
- Constitutional and legal barriers in some countries

Cultural:

- Deep-seated beliefs that politics is "men's domain"
- Religious teachings weaponized against women's leadership
- Expectations that women should prioritize family over politics
- Stereotypes about women's capabilities and temperament
- Community and family pressure against women's political ambitions

Economic:

- Women's poverty limits ability to campaign
- Politics requires resources women don't have (transport, communications, advertising)
- Women lose income during campaigns (less able to take time off work)

- Campaign finance regulations disadvantage women candidates

Violence and Intimidation:

- 42% of women politicians surveyed by RFLD reported experiencing violence
- Physical attacks, sexual harassment, threats against family
- Online harassment and character assassination
- Psychological pressure and intimidation
- Limited legal protection or recourse

Forms of Political Participation: Beyond Parliamentary Seats

Women's political participation extends far beyond formal elected positions:

Grassroots Leadership

Women lead at community level:

- Village development committees: Women organize community projects, mediate conflicts, manage resources
- Market women associations: Economic organizing with political power (market women strikes have toppled governments)
- Faith-based leadership: Women religious leaders influence communities
- Traditional authority: Some societies recognize women chiefs, clan elders, or queens
- Social movements: Women lead labor unions, environmental movements, human rights organizations, peace initiatives

This grassroots leadership is political work—making collective decisions, managing resources, resolving conflicts, representing community interests—even when not recognized as "politics."

Civil Society Advocacy

Women's organizations exercise political power through:

- Policy advocacy: Influencing legislation and government programs
- Budget analysis: Monitoring and advocating for gender-responsive budgeting
- Electoral monitoring: Ensuring free and fair elections
- Accountability mechanisms: Demanding government transparency and responsiveness
- Public education: Raising awareness about rights and governance

Organizations like RFLD enable women's political participation by creating platforms for voice and influence even for those not seeking elected office.

Voting and Electoral Participation

Women's participation as voters shapes political outcomes:

- Women constitute over 50% of registered voters in most countries

- Women's voter turnout often equals or exceeds men's
- Women voters increasingly vote based on issues rather than party/ethnicity
- Women's votes are contested political territory (parties recognize women as crucial constituencies)
- Voter registration drives specifically targeting women have increased participation

Political Party Organizing

Women organize within political parties:

- Women's wings/leagues within parties (though often marginalized)
- Advocacy for gender quotas within party structures
- Coalition building across parties around women's issues
- Pressure on male party leadership to nominate women candidates
- Some women founding new political parties (though resource-constrained)

Youth Political Engagement

Young women (18-35) increasingly engage politically:

- Digital activism and online organizing
- Protest movements (#FeesMustFall in South Africa, #EndSARS in Nigeria)
- Youth political organizations
- Running for office at younger ages
- Challenging gerontocratic political systems
- Innovative tactics (music, art, social media)

Young women face double discrimination (gender + age) but bring new energy, strategies, and perspectives to political participation.

Barriers in Depth: What Keeps Women Out

Violence Against Women in Politics

Political violence against women takes specific, gendered forms designed to deter women's participation:

Physical Violence:

- Beatings, assault, intimidation during campaigns and after election
- Sexual violence as political weapon (rape threats, actual assaults)
- Attacks on women politicians' homes and families
- Assassination in extreme cases

According to UN Women, 38% of women politicians globally have experienced violence, with rates higher in Africa, where the rule of law is weaker.

Psychological Violence:

- Death threats and intimidation

- Harassment and stalking
- Character assassination and reputation destruction
- Exclusion and isolation within political spaces
- Pressure to withdraw from politics

Economic Violence:

- Destruction of property or businesses
- Interference with livelihood
- Withholding campaign resources
- Financial manipulation by parties

Sexual Harassment:

- Within political parties and parliaments
- Quid pro quo demands (sexual favors for political advancement)
- Hostile work environments
- Sexually explicit attacks and comments

Online Violence:

- As documented in RFLD's research, 58% of African women parliamentarians face online attacks
- Sexualized harassment, rape threats, doxxing
- Disinformation campaigns attacking credibility
- Image-based abuse (authentic or fabricated intimate images)

Impact: This violence is designed to send a message—politics is dangerous for women, withdraw now. It works. Many women candidates withdraw after experiencing violence. Others never enter politics because they witness attacks on other women.

RFLD's research found that political violence against women increases during election periods, is often perpetrated by political opponents (including other candidates' supporters), and occurs with near-total impunity—police rarely investigate, prosecutors seldom charge, and perpetrators rarely face consequences.

The "Double Burden"

Women carry disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work (childcare, eldercare, household management), which limits political participation:

- Time poverty: Women have less "free time" for politics than men
- Meeting schedules: Political meetings occur evenings/weekends when women are managing household responsibilities
- Travel requirements: Politics requires travel that's difficult for primary caregivers
- Childcare costs: Campaigning while caring for children is prohibitively expensive
- Family resistance: Families may object to women's political work taking time from household duties

Unlike male politicians who typically have wives managing households, women politicians rarely have equivalent support. They must either hire help (expensive), rely on female relatives (exploiting other women's labor), or exhaust themselves attempting both.

Party Gatekeeping

Political parties control access to candidacy, and parties are male-dominated:

Nomination Processes:

- Party leadership (overwhelmingly male) selects candidates
- Selection criteria favor men (political experience, networks, fundraising capacity—all areas where women face disadvantages)
- Women face hostile interrogation about their qualifications, families, appearance that men don't
- Parties often nominate women in "unwinnable" constituencies while reserving safe seats for men

Internal Party Dynamics:

- Women's wings are often symbolic without real power
- Party meetings scheduled when women can't attend
- Informal decision-making in male-only spaces (bars, clubs, golf courses)
- Sexual harassment within parties
- Women's policy proposals dismissed or stolen by male colleagues

Financing:

- Party resources distributed to favored (male) candidates
- Women receive less party financial support for campaigns
- Funding tied to loyalty to male party bosses

Some women respond by running as independents, but this is extremely difficult without party machinery and resources.

Cultural and Religious Opposition

Patriarchal culture weaponizes tradition and religion against women politicians:

"Un-African" Arguments:

- Women's political leadership framed as Western imposition
- Traditional gender roles invoked to oppose women's equality
- Selective use of culture (ignoring historical women leaders)

Religious Opposition:

- Conservative religious leaders declare women's political leadership sinful
- Scriptural texts selectively interpreted to oppose women's authority over men
- Religious communities mobilized to oppose women candidates

- Women politicians face religious censure and social ostracism

"Bad Mother" Narrative:

- Women politicians accused of neglecting families
- Questions about children, marriage that male candidates never face
- Framing politics and motherhood as mutually exclusive

Respectability Politics:

- Women politicians held to impossible standards of behavior, appearance, morality
- Actions acceptable for male politicians (socializing, strong language, aggressive debate) unacceptable for women
- Women must be simultaneously strong (to lead) and feminine (to be acceptable)—contradictory expectations

Structural Electoral Barriers

Electoral systems and regulations create barriers:

First-Past-The-Post Systems: Winner-take-all systems favor incumbents (mostly men) and make breakthrough difficult for new candidates (disproportionately women).

Proportional Representation: Can be more favorable to women, especially with quotas, but parties control list placement.

Campaign Finance Laws: Regulations on fundraising and spending often don't account for women's disadvantages in accessing funds.

Residency Requirements: In some systems, candidates must be longtime residents of constituencies—difficult for women who move for marriage or work.

Age Requirements: Sometimes set too high, disadvantaging young women.

Nomination Fees: Registration and nomination fees that women struggle to afford.

The Quota Debate: Do Quotas Work?

Gender quotas—reserved seats or mandatory percentages of women candidates—are a controversial yet increasingly common practice in Africa.

Types of Quotas

Constitutional Quotas: Mandated in the Constitution

Legislative Quotas: Set by legislation

Party Quotas: Voluntary commitments by political parties (varies widely)

Reserved Seats: Specific seats allocated to women, filled by appointment or special election

Candidate Quotas: Parties must nominate a minimum percentage of women candidates (30-50%)

The Case For Quotas

Evidence of Impact: Countries with strong quotas have dramatically higher women's representation:

Fast-Tracking Change: Quotas accelerate progress that would otherwise take generations. Organic change is too slow—quotas are a necessary corrective to systematic exclusion.

Legitimacy: Elected bodies should reflect the population. When parliaments are predominantly male, they lack the legitimacy to make decisions on behalf of everyone.

Correcting Discrimination: Quotas address structural discrimination, similar to affirmative action in other contexts.

Changing Culture: Seeing women in political leadership normalizes it, inspiring the next generation and shifting stereotypes.

Policy Impact: Research shows women legislators prioritize different issues (education, health, violence against women) and bring different perspectives that improve governance.

The Case Against Quotas (and Counter-Arguments)

"Merit" Arguments: Opponents claim quotas lead to "unqualified" women being elected.

Counter: This assumes currently elected men are there on merit (often not—they're there through networks, corruption, or violence). It also insults women's capabilities. Quotas create opportunity—women must still compete within those opportunities.

"Token" Concerns: Quotas might lead to symbolic women who don't advance women's interests.

Counter: While some quota beneficiaries are conservative or co-opted, research shows quota women generally do advance women's rights. Even "token" representation creates pathways for more substantive participation.

"Social Engineering" Objections: Some argue quotas artificially manipulate political processes.

Counter: Current systems aren't neutral—they're engineered to favor men. Quotas re-engineer for equity.

Implementation Challenges: Quotas are only effective if properly designed and enforced. Weak quotas with loopholes or no penalties for non-compliance are ineffective.

RFLD's Position

RFLD supports gender quotas as necessary tool for correcting systematic exclusion, while recognizing:

- Quotas alone are insufficient—must be accompanied by addressing violence, party gatekeeping, financing, and cultural barriers
- Quotas must be well-designed (sufficient percentage, zipper lists, enforcement mechanisms)
- Quota beneficiaries need support—training, mentorship, protection

- Long-term goal is making quotas unnecessary through cultural transformation

RFLD's Political Empowerment Work

RFLD operates comprehensive programs supporting women's political participation at all levels:

REFELA Program

RFLD funded REFELA Program (Réseau des Femmes Élues Locales d'Afrique / Network of African Elected Women) strengthens women's political leadership through:

Training and Capacity Building:

- Leadership development for women candidates and elected officials
- Public speaking and media skills
- Campaign strategy and organization
- Legislative process and procedure
- Budget analysis and policy development
- Coalition building and negotiation

Mentorship Networks:

- Pairing experienced women politicians with emerging leaders
- Peer learning and support groups
- Cross-country exchanges (women leaders from different countries share experiences)
- Creating communities of practice

Technical Support:

- Campaign planning assistance
- Message development
- Voter outreach strategies
- Volunteer mobilization
- Using social media and digital tools

Protection and Security:

- Security assessments for women candidates
- Rapid response when women politicians face violence
- Legal support for threats and harassment
- Digital security training
- Coordination with security services when possible

Combating Political Violence

RFLD's work on violence against women in politics includes:

Documentation: Systematically tracking and documenting violence against women politicians and candidates across the region, making patterns visible.

Legal Support: Providing legal representation for women who experience political violence; pursuing criminal cases against perpetrators.

Advocacy: Pushing for legislation specifically criminalizing violence against women in politics, with clear definitions and strong penalties.

Awareness Campaigns: Public education about political violence against women, challenging normalization.

International Advocacy: Bringing cases to regional bodies (African Commission) and international mechanisms when national systems fail.

Solidarity Networks: Rapid response networks that mobilize when women politicians face attacks—public statements, protests, pressure campaigns.

Supporting Young Women Candidates

Recognizing age-based discrimination, RFLD specifically supports young women (18-35) entering politics:

Youth Leadership Programs: Training specifically designed for young women candidates, addressing age-specific challenges.

Intergenerational Dialogue: Creating spaces where young women and veteran politicians can learn from each other, reducing generational tensions.

Digital Campaign Support: Leveraging young women's digital skills while teaching digital security.

Challenging Ageism: Advocacy against party and electoral rules that disadvantage young candidates.

Youth Networks: Building pan-African networks of young women in politics for mutual support and learning.

Gender-Responsive Budgeting

RFLD trains women legislators and civil society advocates in budget analysis:

Understanding Budgets: How to read government budgets, identify gender implications of spending decisions.

Advocacy: How to advocate for budget amendments that address women's needs and priorities.

Monitoring: Tracking budget execution to ensure allocated funds are actually spent as intended.

Transparency: Using budget transparency and public participation in budget processes.

This work recognizes that representation without resources is hollow—women legislators must be able to direct resources to women's priorities.

Quota Advocacy

RFLD advocates for adoption and strengthening of gender quotas:

Technical Support: Helping civil society and women's coalitions develop quota proposals.

Research and Evidence: Providing data on quota effectiveness and best practices.

Coalition Building: Uniting women across political parties, civil society, and regions in quota advocacy.

Legal Analysis: Ensuring proposed quotas are constitutionally sound and enforceable.

Implementation Monitoring: Tracking enforcement and holding parties accountable for compliance.

Cross-Party Women's Caucuses

RFLD facilitates cooperation among women legislators across party lines:

Women's Parliamentary Caucuses: Supporting formation and strengthening of cross-party women's caucuses that collaborate on women's rights issues despite party differences.

Strategic Collaboration: Identifying issues where women can build cross-party consensus and advance legislation.

Collective Power: Recognizing that women legislators, even as minorities within parties, have power when they act collectively.

Success Stories: Women Transforming Politics

Case Study 1: Rwanda's Remarkable Transformation

Rwanda's parliament is 61% women—the highest in the world. How?

Post-Genocide Context: After the 1994 genocide that killed 800,000 people (disproportionately men), women made up 70% of survivors. Women led reconstruction.

Constitutional Design: New constitution mandated 30% women in all decision-making bodies. Electoral system includes reserved seats and proportional representation.

Political Will: Government actively supported women's participation as part of reconciliation and development strategy.

Women's Organizing: Strong women's movement demanded inclusion and supported women candidates.

Results: Beyond numbers, Rwandan women legislators have passed significant laws addressing gender-based violence, property rights, and economic equity.

Lesson: Constitutional quotas with strong enforcement, combined with political will and women's organizing, can rapidly transform representation.

Case Study 2: Senegal's Parity Law

Senegal's 2010 parity law requires that candidate lists for all elections include equal numbers of men and women (50/50).

Feminist Advocacy: Decades of organizing by Senegalese feminists, who built coalitions, lobbied parliament, mobilized public opinion.

Legal Strategy: Advocates framed parity as constitutional equality principle, not "special treatment."

Implementation: Enforcement mechanism ensures party compliance—lists not meeting parity requirements are rejected.

Results: Women's representation in parliament increased from 22% to 43% after the law's implementation.

Impact Beyond Numbers: Women legislators have advanced laws on domestic violence, maternal health, and land rights.

Lesson: Strong laws with enforcement mechanisms work—but require sustained feminist organizing to achieve and maintain.

Case Study 3: Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election as Africa's first female president (2006-2018) broke a continental barrier.

Context: Liberia emerged from brutal civil war (1989-2003) that devastated the country. Women led peace movement that ended the war.

Campaign: Johnson Sirleaf ran on platform of reconciliation, development, and women's empowerment. Her Nobel Peace Prize (2011, shared with Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee) brought international attention.

Presidency: Implemented free primary education, improved healthcare, achieved debt relief, and promoted women's rights. Also faced criticism for nepotism and limited democratic reforms.

Impact: Demonstrated women's capacity for highest political leadership in Africa. Inspired women politicians across the continent.

Lesson: Women's political leadership is possible at highest levels, but requires exceptional circumstances, resources, and persistence.

Case Study 4: Kenya's Women Representatives

Kenya's 2010 constitution created 47 "Women Representative" positions—one per county, elected by all voters in the county.

Design: Intended to boost women's representation while maintaining existing constituency seats (where women rarely won).

Results: Immediately increased women's parliamentary representation. Women Representatives focus on women's issues at county level.

Challenges: Women Representatives sometimes marginalized within parliament, seen as "less legitimate" than constituency representatives. Some male politicians want positions eliminated.

Successes: Many Women Representatives have proven highly effective, delivering services, mobilizing communities, and becoming political forces in their counties.

Lesson: Reserved seat systems can work but must include mechanisms ensuring equal status and resources for women representatives.

Case Study 5: Grassroots Leadership in Benin

RFLD supported women's cooperatives in Benin that evolved into political forces:

Starting Point: Agricultural cooperative organizing women farmers around sustainable farming and market access.

Evolution: As the cooperative succeeded economically, women gained confidence and community respect. They began engaging local government on policy issues affecting them.

Political Impact: Several cooperative members ran for and won local council seats. Others became influential community voices consulted by officials.

Broader Change: Success inspired other women's groups. Local political culture shifted to accept women's leadership.

RFLD's Role: Provided initial training and support for cooperative formation, then supported women's transition into political engagement.

Lesson: Economic organizing can be pathway to political participation—when women have economic success, political participation follows.

Policy Recommendations

For Governments:

1. Adopt and Enforce Gender Quotas

- Constitutional or legislative quotas requiring minimum 30% (preferably 50%) women in all elected bodies
- Include enforcement mechanisms with penalties for non-compliance
- Apply to all levels of government (national, regional, local)

2. Criminalize Violence Against Women in Politics

- Specific legislation defining and prohibiting political violence against women
- Criminal penalties for perpetrators
- Protection mechanisms for women politicians and candidates
- Specialized police units and prosecutors

3. Reform Campaign Finance

- Public funding for political campaigns with requirements for women candidates

- Limits on campaign spending to reduce importance of personal wealth
- Transparency in campaign donations
- Support for women candidates from political development funds

4. Create Enabling Environments

- Parliament childcare facilities and family-friendly schedules
- Gender-responsive standing orders and parliamentary procedures
- Sexual harassment policies and enforcement in political spaces
- Security provisions for women politicians

5. Civic Education

- Public education campaigns promoting women's political participation
- School curricula teaching gender equality in leadership
- Media campaigns challenging stereotypes

For Political Parties:

1. Adopt Internal Gender Quotas

- Party constitutions requiring gender balance in leadership
- Candidate nomination processes ensuring women's representation
- Zipper lists (alternating men and women)

2. Financial Support

- Party resources distributed equitably to women and men candidates
- Special funds supporting women candidates facing financial barriers

3. Address Internal Culture

- Sexual harassment policies and enforcement
- Training on gender equality for party officials
- Inclusive meeting times and locations

4. Mentorship

- Pairing experienced politicians with women candidates
- Creating pathways for women's advancement within parties

For Civil Society and Women's Organizations:

1. Support Women Candidates

- Training, mentorship, technical support
- Protection and security when threatened
- Fundraising support

- Campaign volunteers

2. Monitor and Document

- Track violence against women in politics
- Monitor quota implementation
- Research and publish on women's political participation

3. Advocacy

- Coalition building for quota adoption and reform
- Legal challenges to discriminatory practices
- Media campaigns
- International advocacy

4. Voter Education

- Mobilizing women voters
- Education about women candidates
- Challenging stereotypes and misinformation

For International Community:

1. Political Will and Pressure

- Make women's political participation priority in diplomatic engagement
- Condition aid on progress toward gender equality in governance
- Support regional mechanisms (African Commission, SADC, ECOWAS) in monitoring and enforcement

2. Financial Support

- Fund women's political participation programs
- Support organizations like RFLD working on political empowerment
- Provide emergency support for women politicians facing violence

3. Technical Assistance

- Share best practices on quotas and women's political participation
- Support legal reforms
- Training for women politicians

Politics Redefined

When women enter politics, they don't just take seats at existing tables—they transform the tables themselves.

Women politicians prioritize different issues: healthcare, education, violence against women, social protection. They employ different leadership styles: more collaborative, consultative, focused on consensus-building. They

model different possibilities: you can be a mother and a leader, compassionate and strong, representative of marginalized communities.

Research consistently shows that women's political participation improves governance outcomes—less corruption, more equitable resource distribution, better social services, more sustainable peace.

But women's political participation is not just about improving governance. It is about justice.

Women make up half the population. We deserve half the power. Full stop.

Gender equality in politics is not a "women's issue"—it is a democracy issue. Democracies that exclude half their population are not fully democratic.

African women have always been political—leading communities, organizing markets, mobilizing movements, building peace. What's changed is recognition of this leadership and women's access to formal political power.

RFLD's work demonstrates that advancing women's political participation requires comprehensive approach:

- Legal reforms (quotas, anti-violence legislation)
- Changing political party practices
- Supporting women candidates materially and strategically
- Protecting women from violence
- Challenging cultural stereotypes
- Building women's political skills and confidence
- Creating solidarity networks across borders

The barriers are real and formidable. But they are not insurmountable.

Every woman who runs for office—whether she wins or loses—challenges the lie that politics is only for men.

Every woman who serves in parliament—regardless of her individual politics—expands what's possible for the next generation.

Every grassroots women's organization engaging government expands democratic participation.

From grassroots to government, African women are claiming political power. Not asking permission. Not waiting for invitation. Claiming what is rightfully ours.

As one woman candidate supported by RFLD declared: "They said politics is not for women. We said, watch us. They tried to stop us with violence. We organized security. They tried to silence us with shame. We refused shame. They tried to starve us of resources. We fundraised and sacrificed. Now we are here. And we're not leaving."

Politics is being redefined—by women, for everyone.

#WomenInPolitics #PoliticalParticipation #GenderQuotas #RFLD #AfricanFeminism #WomenLeadership #ElectoraUustice

Reproductive Justice as Liberation: SRHR in the African Context

By RFLD Research Team | 2025

Introduction: Our Bodies, Our Liberation

A 14-year-old girl in Niger, married against her will, dies in childbirth. A woman in Uganda seeks safe abortion care and is turned away, forced to resort to unsafe methods that leave her infertile. A sex worker in Mali cannot access HIV treatment because clinic staff shame and refuse her. A rural woman in Nigerwalks 30 kilometers to the nearest health facility, only to find no midwife, no supplies, no care.

These are not isolated tragedies. They are the predictable consequences of denying African women and gender-diverse people sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Reproductive justice—the right to have children, not have children, and parent children in safe and healthy environments—is fundamental to liberation. Without control over our own bodies, all other freedoms are compromised.

Yet across Africa, SRHR is under systematic attack from multiple directions: restrictive laws criminalizing abortion and LGBTQI+ identities, religious fundamentalism opposing contraception and comprehensive sexuality education, healthcare systems that fail women, patriarchal norms that deny bodily autonomy, and international aid restrictions that defund SRHR services.

The Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement (RFLD) centers SRHR in its Afrofeminist agenda, recognizing that reproductive justice is inseparable from women's liberation, economic justice, political participation, and self-determination.

This article examines SRHR across Africa through an Afrofeminist lens, exploring the current landscape, barriers, resistance strategies, and RFLD's comprehensive approach to advancing reproductive justice.

Understanding Reproductive Justice: Beyond "Choice"

From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice

The reproductive rights framework, developed primarily in Global North contexts, focuses on individual choice: the right to choose whether and when to have children, access to contraception and abortion.

While important, this framework has limitations in African contexts:

1. Individual Choice Requires Resources: "Choice" is meaningless without access to healthcare, information, and economic resources to actualize choices.

2. Ignores Structural Barriers: Reproductive rights language doesn't address poverty, racism, colonialism, forced sterilization, lack of healthcare infrastructure, or other structural barriers limiting options.

3. Narrow Focus: Emphasizes preventing pregnancy more than supporting childbearing and parenting under conditions of dignity.

4. Doesn't Address Coercion: Both to have children (pronatal policies, lack of contraception) and not have children (forced sterilization, coercive population control).

Reproductive Justice Framework

Reproductive justice, developed by Black feminists in the United States and adapted globally, provides more comprehensive framework:

Three Core Principles:

1. The right to have children under conditions of one's choosing

2. The right not to have children through contraception, abortion, or abstinence

3. The right to parent children in safe, healthy, and supportive environments

This framework recognizes that:

- Reproductive freedom requires social, political, and economic justice
- State policy, economic systems, cultural norms, and healthcare access all impact reproductive autonomy
- Intersectionality matters—race, class, disability, sexuality, immigration status all affect reproductive experiences
- Resistance to reproductive oppression must address multiple intersecting systems

For African contexts, reproductive justice must also address:

- Colonial legacies: Abortion laws, anti-LGBTQI+ laws, and healthcare systems imposed during colonialism
- Contemporary imperialism: International restrictions on abortion funding, population control programs
- Cultural complexity: Navigating traditional practices, religious teachings, and modern medicine
- Resource constraints: Making rights meaningful in contexts of poverty and under-resourced healthcare
- Conflict and crisis: SRHR in humanitarian emergencies, conflict zones, displacement

The SRHR Landscape in Africa

Maternal Mortality: An Ongoing Crisis

Africa accounts for 66% of global maternal deaths despite having only 15% of world's population.

Statistics (WHO 2023):

- Maternal Mortality Ratio: 542 deaths per 100,000 live births (global average: 223)
- Lifetime Risk of Maternal Death: 1 in 40 (compared to 1 in 5,400 in high-income countries)
- Leading Causes: Hemorrhage (25%), infections (15%), hypertensive disorders (14%), unsafe abortion (13%), obstructed labor (9%)

Disparities Within Region:

- Rural women face 2-3x higher risk than urban women
- Young women (<20) and older women (>35) at elevated risk
- Ethnic and racial minorities face higher rates
- Poor women far more likely to die than wealthy women

Underlying Causes:

- Inadequate healthcare infrastructure (especially rural)
- Shortage of skilled birth attendants
- Limited access to emergency obstetric care
- Long distances to health facilities
- Costs (official and unofficial fees)
- Poor quality of care when services exist
- Systemic discrimination against poor, rural, young, or minority women

Unsafe Abortion

Abortion is highly restricted across most of Africa:

- Completely prohibited or allowed only to save woman's life in majority of countries
- Criminal penalties for women and providers
- Limited legal exceptions (rape, incest, fetal impairment, health) rarely implemented even where they exist
- Only 4 countries allow abortion on request (South Africa, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and Zambia recently)

Consequences:

- Estimated 6.2 million unsafe abortions annually in Africa
- 16,000+ deaths from unsafe abortion each year
- 1.6 million women hospitalized annually for complications
- Long-term health impacts: Infertility, chronic pain, disability
- Disproportionate impact on poor women: Wealthy women access safe (if illegal) services; poor women resort to dangerous methods

Methods of Unsafe Abortion:

- Herbs, toxic substances, physical trauma
- Unqualified providers in unsanitary conditions
- Complications include hemorrhage, infection, organ damage, death

Criminal Prosecution:

- Women prosecuted for abortion in several countries
- Healthcare workers prosecuted for providing care
- Chilling effect on post-abortion care (women delay treatment fearing prosecution)

Contraceptive Access

Contraceptive Prevalence (modern methods among married women, WHO 2023):

- Regional Average: 28%
- Ranges: From 5% (South Sudan) to 65% (Zimbabwe)
- Unmet Need: 22% of women want to avoid pregnancy but lack access to modern contraception

Barriers to Access:

- Availability: Limited contraceptive methods, frequent stockouts
- Cost: Prohibitive for many women
- Distance: Long travel to facilities
- Provider bias: Healthcare workers impose age, parity, or marital status restrictions not medically indicated
- Partner opposition: Husbands/partners forbid contraceptive use
- Cultural/religious: Opposition from community or religious leaders
- Information: Lack of comprehensive sexuality education
- Quality: Side effects without adequate counseling and follow-up

Youth Access: Young people, particularly unmarried youth, face severe barriers—provider discrimination, parental consent requirements, social stigma.

Child Marriage and Early Pregnancy

Prevalence:

- 39% of girls in Africa marry before age 18
- 12% marry before age 15
- Over 15 million child brides in the region
- Rates highest in West and Central Africa, rural areas

Consequences:

- School dropout (ending educational and economic opportunities)
- Early pregnancy and childbirth (leading cause of death for girls 15-19 globally)
- Increased maternal mortality and morbidity
- Domestic violence and sexual abuse
- Loss of childhood and autonomy

Drivers:

- Poverty (families marry daughters for bride price or to reduce expenses)
- Gender inequality and patriarchal norms
- Insecurity (families marry girls for "protection" during conflict/crisis)
- Lack of educational and economic alternatives
- Cultural traditions

- Weak law enforcement (even where child marriage is illegal)

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)

Prevalence:

- 200+ million girls and women globally have undergone FGM/C
- Concentrated in 31 countries, 27 in Africa
- Prevalence varies: From near-universal in Somalia (98%) to rare in other countries
- Often performed on girls ages 5-15, sometimes infants

Forms:

- Type I: Partial or total removal of clitoris
- Type II: Partial or total removal of clitoris and labia minora
- Type III (Infibulation): Narrowing vaginal opening
- Type IV: Other harmful procedures

Health Consequences:

- Immediate: Severe pain, bleeding, shock, infection, death
- Long-term: Chronic pain, infections, complications in childbirth, psychological trauma, sexual dysfunction
- No health benefits whatsoever

Drivers:

- Cultural tradition and community expectations
- Perceived requirement for marriage
- Beliefs about female sexuality (need to control it)
- Religious interpretations (though no major religion requires it)
- Economic interests (practitioners earn income)

Progress:

- Many countries have criminalized FGM/C
- Prevalence declining in some contexts due to advocacy and community education
- But practice persists, sometimes driven underground by criminalization

LGBTQI+ Health and Rights

Legal Context:

- Homosexuality criminalized in 33 of 54 African countries
- Penalties: Fines, imprisonment (up to life), death penalty in some contexts
- Trans identities: Often pathologized, no legal recognition
- Intersex people: Subjected to nonconsensual surgeries

Healthcare Access:

- Discrimination by healthcare providers
- Fear of seeking care due to potential for outing, arrest
- Services don't address LGBTQI+ specific needs
- Mental health impacts of discrimination and stigma largely unaddressed
- HIV services inadequate for MSM, trans women, other high-risk groups
- Conversion therapy still practiced

Violence:

- Physical and sexual violence against LGBTQI+ people
- "Corrective rape" of lesbians and trans men
- Family rejection and homelessness
- Police violence and extortion
- Limited legal recourse

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

In conflict and post-conflict contexts:

- Sexual violence weaponized in war (DRC, CAR, South Sudan, Somalia, etc.)
- Mass rape, sexual enslavement, forced pregnancy
- Survivors face stigma, injury, unwanted pregnancy, HIV/STIs, psychological trauma
- Limited access to post-rape care (PEP, emergency contraception, safe abortion, treatment for STIs)
- Breakdown of healthcare infrastructure
- Impunity for perpetrators

HIV/AIDS

Africa remains most affected region:

- 25.6 million people living with HIV (67% of global total)
- Women and girls account for 59% of new infections in region
- Young women (15-24) at particular risk
- Key populations (sex workers, MSM, trans people, people who inject drugs) face higher HIV risk and barriers to services

SRHR-HIV Linkages:

- Lack of contraception increases unintended pregnancy among HIV+ women
- Inability to negotiate condom use due to gender inequality
- Sexual violence increases HIV transmission
- Stigma prevents testing and treatment
- Mother-to-child transmission preventable with treatment (but requires access)

Barriers to SRHR: Intersecting Oppressions

Legal and Policy Restrictions

Colonial Legacy: Many current restrictive laws inherited from colonial powers:

- Abortion criminalization from British colonial penal codes
- Anti-sodomy laws imposed by British colonialism
- Victorian sexual morality codified in law

These laws were foreign impositions, not indigenous African values, yet are now defended as "African tradition."

Contemporary Restrictions:

- Laws criminalizing abortion, sex work, LGBTQI+ identities
- Parental consent requirements restricting youth access
- Mandatory waiting periods and biased counseling
- Foreign funding restrictions (US Global Gag Rule prohibits organizations receiving US aid from providing abortion information or services)

Religious Fundamentalism

Conservative religious movements (Christian and Islamic) actively oppose SRHR:

Opposition to Contraception: Some religious groups oppose modern contraception, promoting abstinence or "natural family planning" (ineffective for most women).

Abortion Opposition: Religious groups lobby against abortion law reform, spread misinformation, shame women seeking care.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Religious opposition prevents CSE in schools, leaving young people without accurate information.

LGBTQI+ Rights: Religious leaders claim LGBTQI+ identities are "sins" or "Western imports," advocating criminalization and discrimination.

Impact on Policy: Religious institutions' influence on governments prevents progressive SRHR legislation.

Healthcare System Failures

Even where services are theoretically available, healthcare systems fail women:

Infrastructure: Under-resourced facilities, inadequate supplies, equipment shortages.

Human Resources: Shortage of healthcare workers, especially in rural areas; lack of specialists in obstetrics, gynecology.

Quality: Poor quality of care, lack of evidence-based practices, mistreatment of patients.

Cost: User fees, official and unofficial, make care unaffordable for poor women.

Discrimination: Healthcare workers discriminate against young women, unmarried women, poor women, LGBTQI+ people, sex workers, women living with HIV.

Confidentiality: Breaches of confidentiality (especially for youth, LGBTQI+ people, women seeking abortion) prevent care-seeking.

Patriarchal Control Over Women's Bodies

Patriarchy denies women bodily autonomy through:

Male Control: Husbands, fathers, male relatives make decisions about women's reproductive lives (whether to use contraception, continue or terminate pregnancy, access healthcare).

Pronatal Pressure: Women pressured to have many children; infertility stigmatized; childless women marginalized.

Sexual Double Standards: Women's sexuality controlled while men's is not; virginity demanded for women but not men.

Victim-Blaming: Women blamed for pregnancy, sexual violence, HIV infection.

Motherhood as Mandatory: Women who don't want children viewed as selfish or abnormal.

Economic Barriers

Poverty restricts reproductive autonomy:

- Cannot afford healthcare, contraception, safe abortion
- Lack transportation to facilities
- Cannot take time off work for healthcare
- Economic dependence on men who control decisions

Information Gaps

Lack of comprehensive sexuality education leaves people without:

- Accurate information about their bodies, reproduction, sexuality
- Knowledge of contraceptive methods and how to access them
- Understanding of rights
- Skills for negotiating consent, condom use, relationships

Misinformation fills this gap—myths about contraception causing infertility, abortion causing cancer, etc.

Violence and Coercion

Sexual and gender-based violence undermines SRHR:

- Rape and sexual assault result in unwanted pregnancy, HIV/STI transmission, trauma

- Intimate partner violence prevents contraceptive negotiation
- Forced pregnancy through contraceptive sabotage
- Forced abortion or sterilization
- Violence against LGBTQI+ people

RFLD's SRHR Work: A Comprehensive Approach

RFLD advances reproductive justice through multiple strategies:

Safe Abortion Access and Post-Abortion Care

Advocacy for Law Reform:

- Coalition-building for abortion law reform campaigns
- Research and documentation of unsafe abortion's impact
- Regional advocacy at African Commission
- Counter-narratives challenging stigma

Supporting Service Provision:

- Supporting organizations providing safe abortion where legal
- Ensuring access to post-abortion care (which is legal even where abortion isn't)
- Medical abortion (medication) increasing access even under restrictive laws

Legal Defense:

- Representing women and providers prosecuted for abortion
- Strategic litigation challenging restrictive laws

Maternal Health and Safe Childbirth

Advocacy:

- Demanding increased healthcare funding
- Accountability for maternal deaths (maternal death reviews)
- Training for healthcare workers in respectful maternity care

Community Mobilization:

- Educating communities about danger signs in pregnancy
- Supporting community health workers
- Emergency transport systems
- Birth preparedness planning

Direct Support:

- Supporting organizations providing maternal healthcare
- Emergency obstetric care facilities

Ending FGM/C

Community-Led Approaches:

- Working with communities practicing FGM/C to understand and abandon practice
- Alternative rites of passage for girls
- Economic alternatives for practitioners
- Engaging religious and traditional leaders

Supporting Survivors:

- Healthcare for complications
- Psychological support
- Legal support for those facing pressure to undergo FGM/C

Advocacy:

- For laws prohibiting FGM/C
- Against medicalization (performing FGM/C in medical settings)

LGBTQI+ Health and Rights

Healthcare Access:

- Training healthcare workers on LGBTQI+ competent care
- Establishing LGBTQI+-friendly services
- Advocacy against discrimination in healthcare

Legal Reform:

- Decriminalization campaigns
- Legal recognition for trans identities
- Anti-discrimination legislation

Protection:

- Emergency support for LGBTQI+ people facing violence
- Safe houses and relocation
- Mental health support

Visibility and Organizing:

- Supporting LGBTQI+ organizations
- Amplifying LGBTQI+ voices
- Building coalitions between LGBTQI+ and broader feminist movements

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)

Advocacy:

- For mandatory CSE in schools
- Age-appropriate, science-based, rights-based curricula
- Addressing sexuality, gender, consent, relationships, not just biology

Community Education:

- Educating parents and communities about importance of CSE
- Community-based sexuality education where schools don't provide it

Youth Leadership:

- Supporting youth-led organizations providing peer education
- Youth advocacy for CSE

Contraceptive Access

Service Delivery Support:

- Supporting organizations providing contraceptive services
- Task-shifting (training non-physician providers)
- Community-based distribution

Advocacy:

- For increased contraceptive funding and procurement
- Against provider-imposed restrictions (age, parity, marital status)
- For youth-friendly services

Information:

- Accurate information about methods, effectiveness, side effects
- Countering myths and misinformation

Addressing Child Marriage

Community Mobilization:

- Engaging communities in dialogue about harms of child marriage
- Alternative sources of income for families (reducing economic drivers)
- Educational scholarships for girls
- Puberty education and girls' empowerment programs

Legal Enforcement:

- Advocacy for enforcement of minimum marriage age laws
- Legal support for girls forced into marriage

Supporting Married Girls:

- Sexual and reproductive health services for married adolescents
- Education and economic opportunities
- Safe spaces and support networks

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Documentation:

- Documenting conflict-related sexual violence for accountability

Services:

- Emergency post-rape care (PEP, emergency contraception, treatment)
- Psychosocial support for survivors
- Safe abortion for pregnancies resulting from rape

Advocacy:

- For prosecution of perpetrators (national and international tribunals)
- For reparations for survivors
- For women's inclusion in peace processes

Research and Knowledge Production

RFLD produces research on SRHR:

- Documenting SRHR violations
- Collecting data on maternal mortality, unsafe abortion, contraceptive access
- Amplifying African feminist analysis of SRHR
- Evidence for advocacy and policy change

Success Stories: Advancing Reproductive Justice

Case Study 1: Mozambique's Progressive Abortion Law

Context: Mozambique historically had restrictive abortion laws (Portuguese colonial legacy).

Campaign: Feminist organizations, supported by regional networks, advocated for reform.

Law Reform (2014): New law allows abortion on request in first trimester, and later for health reasons, rape, fetal impairment.

Implementation: Government and civil society trained providers, established services, educated public.

Results: Maternal mortality from unsafe abortion reduced; women accessing safe, legal services.

Lesson: Law reform is possible with sustained advocacy, coalition-building, and evidence of unsafe abortion's harm.

Case Study 2: Community-Led FGM/C Abandonment in Senegal

Tostan Model: Senegalese organization Tostan developed community-led approach to FGM/C abandonment.

Method: Community education on human rights, health, and problem-solving; communities make collective decisions to abandon FGM/C; public declarations of abandonment.

Results: Thousands of communities have publicly abandoned FGM/C; approach has been replicated across Africa.

Lesson: Community-led, rights-based approaches are more effective than top-down criminalization alone.

Case Study 3: South Africa's Comprehensive LGBTQI+ Rights

Context: South Africa's post-apartheid constitution prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation (first in world).

Rights Established:

- Same-sex marriage legal (2006)
- Anti-discrimination laws
- Hate crime legislation
- Access to gender-affirming healthcare

Reality: Despite progressive laws, LGBTQI+ people still face violence and discrimination (especially in townships and rural areas), showing that legal change alone is insufficient without cultural transformation.

Activism: Strong LGBTQI+ movement continues advocacy for implementation and cultural change.

Lesson: Legal reform is necessary but not sufficient; must be accompanied by cultural change, education, and enforcement.

Case Study 4: Benin Women's Cooperative Health Services

Initiative: Women's agricultural cooperative in Benin (supported by RFLD) established health fund providing reproductive healthcare for members.

Services: Contraception, prenatal care, safe childbirth, emergency obstetric care, post-abortion care.

Financing: Combination of member contributions, cooperative profits, and external support.

Results: Reduced maternal mortality among members; increased contraceptive use; women accessing care earlier in pregnancy; cooperative members become advocates for SRHR in wider community.

Lesson: Community-based, economically-integrated approaches to healthcare can work where healthcare systems fail.

What Must Change: A Reproductive Justice Agenda

Legal Reforms Needed:

1. Decriminalize abortion and expand access (on request through first trimester minimum; later for health, rape, fetal impairment)

2. Decriminalize LGBTQI+ identities (repeal colonial-era sodomy laws)

3. Enforce minimum marriage age laws (18) and eliminate exceptions

4. Criminalize FGM/C while supporting community-led abandonment

5. Comprehensive anti-discrimination laws protecting SRHR access

Healthcare System Transformation:

1. Increase funding for sexual and reproductive healthcare

2. Train providers in respectful, evidence-based, rights-based care

3. Eliminate user fees for SRHR services

4. Expand services to rural and underserved areas

5. Ensure confidentiality and privacy

6. Address provider bias and discrimination

7. Integrate services (family planning, HIV, maternal health, etc.)

Comprehensive Sexuality Education:

1. Mandatory CSE in all schools, age-appropriate, science-based

2. Address gender, consent, relationships, not just biology

3. Train teachers effectively

4. Counter religious opposition with evidence and rights-based arguments

5. Community-based education where schools don't provide

Addressing Patriarchy and Gender Inequality:

1. Challenge male control over women's reproductive decisions

2. Economic empowerment for women (reducing economic dependence)

3. Legal reforms ensuring women's autonomy (property rights, equal marriage laws)

4. Address gender-based violence

5. Transform masculinities (challenging harmful masculine norms)

International Responsibilities:

1. Remove funding restrictions (Global Gag Rule and similar policies)

2. Increase funding for SRHR in Africa

3. Support African-led organizations and movements

4. Stop coercive population control programs

5. Address how debt, trade, and economic policies undermine health systems

Reproductive Justice is Liberation

Control over our bodies is foundational to all other freedoms.

Without the ability to decide whether, when, and under what circumstances to have children, women cannot:

- Complete education
- Pursue economic opportunities
- Participate equally in public life
- Achieve their full potential
- Live with dignity and autonomy

Reproductive oppression is not "women's issue" separate from other justice struggles. It is central to:

- Economic justice: Forced pregnancy and childbearing keep women poor
- Political participation: Women who cannot control reproduction cannot fully participate in politics
- Education: Adolescent pregnancy is leading cause of school dropout for girls
- Health: Maternal mortality and unsafe abortion kill women
- Violence prevention: Sexual violence and reproductive coercion are forms of gender-based violence
- LGBTQI+ justice: Denial of sexual and reproductive rights targets queer communities

Afrofeminism recognizes these connections and refuses to separate reproductive justice from broader liberation struggles.

RFLD's work demonstrates that advancing reproductive justice requires:

- Legal reform (decriminalizing abortion and LGBTQI+ identities, enforcing marriage age laws)
- Healthcare transformation (accessible, affordable, quality, rights-based services)
- Cultural change (challenging patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, stigma)
- Economic justice (addressing poverty that constrains reproductive choices)
- Community mobilization (people understanding and claiming their rights)
- International solidarity (removing restrictions, increasing resources)

The resistance is fierce. Religious fundamentalists, patriarchs, governments invested in control over women's bodies, and international actors imposing restrictions all oppose reproductive justice.

But African feminists resist. Every day. In every way:

- Doctors providing safe abortion despite restrictive laws
- Community health workers distributing contraception
- Activists organizing for law reform
- Lawyers defending women prosecuted for abortion
- Educators teaching young people about their bodies and rights
- LGBTQI+ people living openly despite criminalization
- Communities collectively deciding to abandon FGM/C
- Women supporting women through every reproductive decision and experience

Reproductive justice is not just about access to healthcare. It's about liberation—the fundamental right to determine our own lives, bodies, and futures.

As Audre Lorde wrote: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Claiming control over our reproductive lives is political warfare against every system that seeks to control us.

This is the struggle. This is the work. This is liberation.

#ReproductiveJustice #SRHR #BodilyAutonomy #AfricanFeminism #AbortionRights #EndChildMarriage #EndFGM #LGBTQIRights #MaternalHealth

ARTICLE 8: CLIMATE CRISIS THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

Environmental Justice in Africa

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction: The Gendered Face of Climate Change

Climate change is not gender-neutral. Across Africa, women and girls bear disproportionate burdens from environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and climate-related disasters while having the least access to resources for adaptation and mitigation. Yet mainstream climate discourse too often treats women as vulnerable victims rather than recognizing them as powerful agents of environmental justice and sustainable development.

Feminist climate justice necessitates that we examine the climate crisis through intersectional lenses, considering how gender, race, class, geography, and other factors influence both climate vulnerability and response capacity. It requires centering the knowledge, leadership, and priorities of women most affected by environmental change. And it calls for transformative approaches that address root causes—including extractive capitalism, colonial resource exploitation, and patriarchal systems that devalue care work and community wellbeing.

This article examines the impacts of climate change on African women, analyzes the structural factors that create gendered climate vulnerability, documents women's leadership in environmental movements, and proposes feminist approaches to climate justice that transform rather than merely tweak existing systems.

The Gendered Impacts of Climate Crisis in Africa

Agricultural Disruption and Food Insecurity

Agriculture employs approximately 60% of Africa's workforce, with women constituting the majority of small-scale farmers. Women produce up to 80% of the food for household consumption in African regions. Yet, they have significantly less access to land ownership, credit, agricultural inputs, extension services, and technology than men.

Climate change is devastating agricultural systems through:

- Changing rainfall patterns that make planting seasons unpredictable
- Increased frequency of droughts destroying crops and livestock
- Flooding that erodes soil and contaminates water sources
- Rising temperatures are reducing crop yields and expanding pest ranges
- Desertification converts arable land to desert

These impacts translate directly into increased workloads for women who must:

- Travel farther distances to find water and firewood
- Work longer hours cultivating increasingly unproductive land
- Diversify livelihood strategies to compensate for agricultural losses
- Reduce their own food consumption to feed children
- Migrate seasonally or permanently in search of resources

A study in Kenya found that women spend an average of 5-8 hours daily collecting water during droughts, compared to 2-3 hours in normal conditions. This time cannot be spent on income generation, education, rest, or political participation. Girls are often removed from school to help with increased domestic labor.

Food insecurity resulting from climate-related agricultural losses also increases women's vulnerability to gender-based violence. Research across multiple African countries documents how hunger and economic stress correlate with spikes in intimate partner violence, transactional sex, and child marriage as families employ desperate coping strategies.

Water Scarcity and Health Impacts

Climate change is intensifying water stress across Africa through reduced rainfall, increased evaporation, and degradation of water sources. By 2025, an estimated 230 million Africans will face water scarcity, with women and girls bearing primary responsibility for water collection in 72% of households.

Water scarcity creates multiple gendered burdens:

Increased labor: Women and girls spend more time traveling to distant water sources, often walking 6 kilometers or more daily, carrying loads of 20 kilograms or more, and waiting hours at overcrowded wells. This physical labor causes musculoskeletal injuries, exhaustion, and missed economic and educational opportunities.

Health risks: Contaminated water from degraded sources causes waterborne diseases, including cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. Women caring for sick family members face increased care burdens. Pregnant women face heightened risks from dehydration and water-related diseases.

Safety threats: Women and girls fetching water in remote areas face sexual violence and harassment. In conflict-affected regions, water collection points become sites of kidnapping and assault. Many women report delaying water collection until nightfall to avoid detection, increasing both dehydration and safety risks.

Hygiene challenges: Water scarcity forces impossible choices between drinking water, cooking, hygiene, and menstrual management. Inadequate water for menstrual hygiene contributes to school absenteeism and health problems for girls and women.

Climate-Related Displacement and Migration

Climate change is already forcing millions of Africans to move due to droughts, floods, storms, and environmental damage. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reports that in 2023 alone, weather-related disasters displaced 1.2 million people across Africa, with estimates suggesting that by 2050, 86 million climate migrants will be on the move within the continent.

Climate displacement creates specific vulnerabilities based on gender:

- Loss of livelihoods: Displacement deprives women of access to the land they farmed, the markets where they traded, and the social networks offering economic opportunities. Even with insecure land tenure, displacement often completely erases women's customary claims.

- Increased violence: Camps and makeshift settlements for displaced populations have higher incidences of gender-based violence. Crowded conditions, poor lighting, unsafe sanitation, and weakened community protection contribute to environments where sexual violence is more likely. According to UNHCR, displaced women are 2-3 times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than non-displaced women.

- Disrupted services: Displacement hampers access to healthcare, education, and social support. Pregnant women lose access to prenatal care and safe childbirth facilities. Children miss school, and chronic health conditions remain untreated.

- Family separation: Climate migration often sees men moving to cities for work, leaving women behind in rural areas to care for households and elderly relatives. This increases women's burdens and reduces economic support. When women migrate, they face greater risks of trafficking and exploitation.

Health Impacts

Climate change poses both direct and indirect health risks that impact women more severely:

Heat-related illnesses become more common as rising temperatures lead to heat stress, especially endangering pregnant women, elderly women, and those working outdoors or in agriculture. Extreme heat raises the risk of premature birth, stillbirth, and maternal death.

Vector-borne diseases are spreading to new areas due to altered rainfall patterns and higher temperatures, affecting vectors like mosquitoes (malaria, dengue), tsetse flies (sleeping sickness), and ticks. Women often face greater exposure because of their caregiving roles, caring for sick family members and spending more time at home where vectors breed.

Respiratory issues increase due to more dust from desertification, indoor air pollution from burning alternative fuels when traditional sources vanish, and wildfires caused by extreme heat. Women are more exposed due to their domestic activities, including cooking.

Mental health challenges arise from ongoing stress related to climate-driven resource shortages, loss of livelihoods, displacement, and inability to support their families. Research shows women affected by climate disasters experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma, yet mental health services remain scarce.

Reproductive health is impacted through various pathways: malnutrition affects fetal and maternal health; heat stress increases pregnancy complications; water shortages compromise hygiene; and disrupted healthcare services limit access to contraception, prenatal care, and safe delivery options.

Structural Roots of Gendered Climate Vulnerability

Land Rights and Resource Access

Women's heightened climate vulnerability is not natural or inevitable—it results from structural inequalities that deny women control over productive resources.

Across Africa, discriminatory laws and customary practices restrict women's land ownership. Even where laws guarantee women's land rights, customary systems often deny inheritance rights, require male relatives' permission for land transactions, and invalidate women's claims upon widowhood or divorce. Only 15% of landholders in Africa are women.

This land inequality creates climate vulnerability because:

- Women cannot access credit (which requires land collateral) for climate adaptation investments
- Women have less decision-making power over land use and conservation practices
- Women's insecure tenure discourages long-term investments in soil conservation and sustainable agriculture
- Women have weaker negotiating positions when communities are displaced

Similarly, women have limited access to water rights, forest resources, and common property—all critical for climate adaptation. Laws governing natural resource management often vest control in male household heads or community leaders who are predominantly men.

Economic Marginalization

Women's concentration in informal, precarious, and low-paid sectors increases climate vulnerability. When climate shocks disrupt economies, informal workers often lack social protection, unemployment benefits, and insurance. Women's businesses—often based on climate-dependent sectors like agriculture, fishing, and forestry—collapse with no safety net.

The gender pay gap (women in Africa earn on average 30% less than men for comparable work) means women have fewer savings to draw on during climate emergencies. Financial exclusion—only 37% of women in Africa have bank accounts compared to 48% of men—limits women's access to credit for adaptation investments or emergency resources.

Women's unpaid care work, which increases dramatically during climate crises, prevents them from engaging in income-generating activities. The economic system fails to value or support this essential labor, leaving women economically vulnerable.

Political Exclusion

Women's underrepresentation in climate governance and decision-making means adaptation and mitigation strategies often fail to address women's priorities or leverage women's knowledge.

Women hold only 27% of parliamentary seats in African countries, and even fewer positions in local governments where many climate adaptation decisions are made. In climate negotiations, African women are severely underrepresented in national delegations.

This exclusion means:

- Climate policies overlook gendered impacts and needs
- Adaptation investments prioritize sectors where men predominate
- Women's indigenous knowledge about ecosystem management and sustainable practices is ignored
- Relief and recovery programs distribute resources through male household heads, often failing to reach women and children

Intersection with Other Oppressions

Climate vulnerability is compounded by intersecting forms of oppression. Poor women face greater vulnerability than wealthy women. Rural women face different challenges than urban women. Women with disabilities, elderly women, and LGBTQI+ individuals face specific barriers to accessing resources and protection.

Indigenous women often face land dispossession in the name of conservation or climate mitigation projects. Pastoralist women face restrictions on mobility as climate change forces communities to migrate in search of pasture and water. Women in conflict-affected regions face combined threats of violence, displacement, and environmental degradation.

The Extractive Economy and Climate Crisis

Colonial Roots of Environmental Destruction

Africa's contemporary environmental crisis cannot be understood in isolation from its histories of colonial extraction. European colonizers restructured African economies to extract raw materials for export—minerals, timber, agricultural commodities—with no regard for environmental sustainability or local livelihoods.

Colonial forestry policies alienated communities from forests, imposing "scientific" management that prioritized timber extraction over community forest use. Colonial agricultural policies encouraged the production of cash crops (such as cotton, coffee, cocoa, and palm oil) that depleted soils and replaced diverse food crops with monocultures. Colonial mining extracted minerals while leaving behind environmental devastation.

These patterns established extractive economic models that persist today, now driving climate change through continued fossil fuel extraction, deforestation, industrial agriculture, and mineral mining.

Contemporary Extractivism

African countries remain entrenched in extractive economic models that serve global capitalism, while devastating local environments and communities. Foreign corporations extract oil, gas, minerals, and timber, generating massive carbon emissions while profits flow abroad and environmental costs are borne locally.

Oil extraction in the Niger Delta has caused massive environmental destruction—oil spills, gas flaring, water contamination—while impoverishing local communities, particularly women who depend on fishing and farming. Mining operations across Africa displace communities, contaminate water sources, and create health hazards, with women facing sexual violence from mine workers and loss of livelihoods.

Industrial agriculture for export—such as palm oil in West Africa, flowers in East Africa, and fruit in Southern Africa—utilizes massive water resources, degrades soils, and employs women in precarious, low-paid work while displacing small-scale, predominantly female farmers.

False Climate Solutions

Many proposed climate solutions perpetuate extractivism under green guises:

Carbon offset projects: Northern polluters purchase carbon credits from African conservation or tree-planting projects, allowing continued emissions while constraining African development. These projects often acquire community land, restrict access to resources, and fail to benefit local populations—particularly women.

Large-scale biofuel production: Converting food cropland to biofuel production displaces food production, increases hunger, and often involves land grabs that dispossess small-scale farmers, predominantly women.

Mega-dams: Presented as clean energy, large hydroelectric dams displace communities, disrupt river ecosystems, and create new vulnerabilities. Women lose access to riverine resources and face increased labor burdens in resettlement areas.

Geoengineering: Proposals for large-scale technological interventions (stratospheric aerosol injection, ocean fertilization) to manage climate carry enormous risks and would be decided by Northern governments and corporations without African input.

True climate justice requires rejecting these false solutions and pursuing alternatives rooted in the priorities and knowledge of African communities.

Women's Leadership in Environmental Movements

Despite—and because of—heightened climate vulnerability, African women are leading powerful environmental movements.

Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

Kenya's Green Belt Movement, founded by Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, pioneered grassroots environmental organizing by mobilizing women to plant trees, conserve soils, and protect forests. Recognizing that ecological destruction and political oppression were linked, Maathai connected environmental activism with democracy movements, women's rights, and good governance.

The Green Belt Movement has planted over 51 million trees, providing income to thousands of women. It demonstrated that women's environmental activism is not merely about survival but about transforming power relations and building sustainable, democratic societies.

Community Forest Management

Across Africa, women are organizing to protect forests, manage resources sustainably, and challenge destructive logging and mining. In Cameroon, women forest monitors document illegal logging and advocate for community forest rights. In Tanzania, women's groups practice sustainable harvesting of forest products while protecting biodiversity.

These movements demonstrate indigenous knowledge systems that have sustained forests for generations—knowledge often dismissed as primitive but increasingly recognized as sophisticated ecological management.

Climate Justice Organizing

African women climate justice activists are connecting local struggles to global movements, demanding that polluting nations pay their climate debt, and insisting that African voices be included in shaping climate policy. Young African women, such as Vanessa Nakate (Uganda), Ayakha Melithafa (South Africa), and Adenike Oladosu (Nigeria), are powerful voices challenging climate injustice and demanding urgent action.

Agroecology and Food Sovereignty

Women farmers across Africa practice and promote agroecology—farming approaches based on ecological principles, biodiversity, local knowledge, and food sovereignty. Agroecology offers climate resilience through the cultivation of diverse crops, soil conservation, effective water management, and reduced reliance on fossil-fuel-intensive inputs.

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), with strong participation by women, promotes agroecology as a climate solution that also addresses hunger, nutrition, and the economic empowerment of women.

Energy Access and Renewables

Women-led initiatives are expanding access to clean energy through the use of solar panels, efficient cookstoves, and community-owned renewable energy sources. Organizations like Solar Sister train women to become clean energy entrepreneurs, providing income while reducing indoor air pollution and deforestation.

Feminist Climate Justice: Principles and Strategies

Centering Women's Leadership and Knowledge

Climate justice requires centering women's voices—particularly those of women who are most affected—in climate governance, policy, and programming. This means:

- Ensuring women's equal representation in climate negotiations and decision-making bodies
- Providing resources and platforms for grassroots women to share knowledge and priorities
- Recognizing indigenous and local knowledge systems, often transmitted through women
- Compensating women for participation in climate processes (transport, childcare, time)

Addressing Root Causes

Feminist climate justice rejects technocratic solutions that ignore underlying structures of exploitation. Instead, it demands:

- Economic transformation: Moving from extractive capitalism to regenerative economies that value care work, community wellbeing, and ecological sustainability
- Resource redistribution: Ensuring land, water, and productive resources are controlled by communities, with women's rights guaranteed
- Climate debt payment: Requiring Global North countries (responsible for the majority of historical emissions) to pay climate debt to Africa through grants (not loans) for adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage
- Corporate accountability: Holding fossil fuel companies, mining corporations, and industrial agriculture accountable for environmental destruction

Securing Women's Rights

Climate adaptation must include securing women's rights:

- Land rights: Legal reforms and implementation ensuring women's equal land ownership, inheritance, and control
- Economic rights: Access to credit, markets, agricultural inputs, technology, and social protection
- Political rights: Expanding women's political participation and decision-making power at all levels
- Bodily autonomy: Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, which climate disruption threatens

Supporting Locally-Led Adaptation

Climate finance must reach local communities and prioritize locally-led adaptation rather than large-scale projects designed by external experts. This requires:

- Direct funding to grassroots women's organizations and community groups
- Flexible funding that supports community-identified priorities
- Simplified application processes accessible to grassroots groups
- Multi-year funding for sustained work
- Recognition and funding for unpaid care and community work

Promoting Agroecology and Food Sovereignty

Supporting women farmers to practice agroecology provides climate resilience while advancing food sovereignty and nutrition. Investments should support:

- Farmer-to-farmer knowledge sharing and seed exchange
- Agroecological research by and for small-scale farmers
- Markets for diverse, locally-produced foods
- Protection from corporate seed monopolies and land grabs

Feminist Just Transition

As Africa transitions from fossil fuels to renewable energy, just transition frameworks must ensure:

- Workers in fossil fuel industries have alternative livelihoods

- Energy transitions create decent work, including for women
- Communities control renewable energy infrastructure
- Energy poverty is eliminated while reducing emissions
- Transitions don't reproduce gender inequalities in new sectors

Climate-Induced Migration Rights

As climate change forces migration, feminist approaches demand:

- Recognition of climate refugees in international law
- Safe migration pathways with labor protections
- Anti-trafficking measures and violence prevention in displacement contexts
- Women's participation in displacement governance and resource distribution
- Support for women who remain in climate-affected areas when men migrate

RFLD's Climate Justice Work

RFLD integrates climate justice across our programmatic pillars:

Linking climate and women's rights: We document how climate change impacts women's human rights and advocate for climate policies that advance gender equality.

Supporting women environmental defenders: We provide protection and legal support to women who defend land, forests, water, and communities against environmentally destructive projects.

Building women's climate leadership: We train women in climate science, policy, and advocacy, ensuring African women shape climate discourse and decisions.

Promoting sustainable livelihoods: We support women's economic empowerment through climate-resilient livelihoods, including agroecology, renewable energy, and sustainable resource management.

Advocacy and policy: We engage African governments and regional bodies to adopt climate policies that advance gender equality and climate justice.

Pan-African solidarity: We connect women environmental activists across Africa for learning, mutual support, and coordinated advocacy.

Policy Recommendations

To African Governments:

- Integrate gender perspectives into all climate policies, plans, and programs
- Guarantee women's land and resource rights through legal reform and implementation
- Ensure women's equal participation in climate decision-making at all levels
- Invest in climate adaptation that prioritizes women's priorities and knowledge
- Regulate extractive industries and protect communities from environmental destruction
- Support agroecology and food sovereignty

- Provide social protection for climate-affected populations with special attention to women

To International Donors and UN Agencies:

- Provide climate finance as grants (not loans) to avoid increasing African debt
- Channel climate finance directly to grassroots women's organizations
- Simplify access to climate funds for local communities
- Ensure adaptation finance reaches most vulnerable populations
- Support locally-led adaptation rather than externally-designed projects
- Hold corporations accountable for environmental destruction

To Global North Governments:

- Drastically reduce emissions in line with climate science
- Pay climate debt to Africa through significant climate finance
- Support technology transfer for renewable energy
- Stop extracting African resources that drive climate change
- Provide legal pathways for climate migrants

To Civil Society:

- Center women's leadership in climate movements
- Build coalitions linking climate justice with economic justice, democracy, and human rights
- Document climate impacts on women's rights
- Challenge false climate solutions and corporate greenwashing
- Support grassroots women's environmental organizing

Climate Justice is Feminist Justice

The climate crisis and gender inequality are inseparable—both rooted in systems of exploitation, extraction, and domination. Climate change disproportionately harms women because patriarchal systems deny women control over resources, exclude women from decision-making, and devalue women's labor and knowledge. Yet women are also powerful agents of climate justice, leading movements, innovating solutions, and articulating visions of sustainable futures.

Feminist climate justice recognizes these realities and demands transformative change. It rejects technocratic tinkering and false solutions, instead pursuing fundamental restructuring of economic and political systems toward regeneration, care, and collective wellbeing.

The path to climate justice runs through women's liberation. Conversely, women's liberation requires climate justice. These struggles are one.

As African women climate activists declare: "Climate justice is feminist justice. Feminist justice is climate justice. Our liberation is bound together."

ARTICLE 9: QUEER RESISTANCE

LGBTQI+ Rights and African Feminism

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction: The Inseparability of Struggles

Sexual and gender diversity has always existed in Africa. Across the continent's vast cultural landscape, pre-colonial societies recognized multiple genders, same-sex relationships, and gender non-conforming expressions. Historical evidence—from Bugandan palace officials to female husbands in Kenya, from Hausa 'yan daudu to the mummies of ancient Egypt—documents rich traditions of gender and sexual diversity long before Western categories of LGBTQI+ identity emerged.

Yet today, LGBTQI+ Africans face pervasive violence, criminalization, and denial of fundamental rights. Seventy African countries maintain colonial-era laws criminalizing same-sex relationships. Anti-LBGTQI+ rhetoric has intensified, with religious and political leaders scapegoating queer communities for social problems. Violence—from state persecution to vigilante attacks—has escalated dramatically.

This contemporary homophobia and transphobia is not "traditional" or authentically African. Instead, it is a toxic import of colonial Christianity, Victorian moral codes, and modern evangelical fundamentalism. The claim that homosexuality is "un-African" erases historical realities, indigenous knowledge systems, and the lived experiences of queer Africans who have always been part of our communities.

Afrofeminism, as a liberatory framework committed to dismantling all systems of oppression, must center LGBTQI+ rights. Feminist movements cannot achieve liberation while any women—including lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women—face violence and exclusion. The struggles for women's rights, sexual rights, and LGBTQI+ rights are inseparable strands of the same liberation movement.

This article examines the realities facing LGBTQI+ Africans, analyzes the forces driving contemporary homophobia and transphobia, documents queer resistance and organizing, explores tensions within feminist movements around LGBTQI+ inclusion, and articulates an Afrofeminist vision of liberation that embraces all bodies, all genders, all loves.

The Reality of LGBTQI+ Lives in Africa

Legal Persecution

Thirty-four African countries criminalize same-sex sexual acts, a legacy of British, French, and Belgian colonial law. Penalties range from fines and imprisonment to life sentences and, in some contexts, death penalties.

Colonial Origins: Britain imposed anti-sodomy laws across its colonies through the Indian Penal Code and similar legislation. These laws—Section 377 in former British colonies, Articles 331 and 333 in former French colonies—had no basis in pre-colonial African legal systems. They were tools of colonial control, used to criminalize African sexualities and impose European Christian morality.

Contemporary Enforcement: While some laws remain dormant, others are actively enforced:

- In Uganda, the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) imposes life imprisonment for same-sex acts and death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality"
- In Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (2014) criminalizes same-sex marriage and LGBTQI+ organizations, with 14-year prison sentences
- In Tanzania, convictions for same-sex acts carry 30-year to life sentences
- Across many countries, laws are used for arrest, detention, extortion, and torture even without formal conviction

Beyond Criminalization: Even where same-sex acts aren't criminalized, LGBTQI+ persons face legal discrimination:

- No African country recognizes same-sex marriage (though South Africa recognizes civil unions)
- Transgender persons cannot access legal gender recognition in most countries
- Anti-LGBTQI+ laws prohibit "promotion" of homosexuality, criminalizing advocacy and education
- Family law discriminates against same-sex couples in child custody, inheritance, and immigration

State-Sanctioned Violence

Governments across Africa perpetrate and condone violence against LGBTQI+ persons:

Police violence: LGBTQI+ individuals report routine police harassment, arbitrary arrest, sexual violence, torture, and extortion. In Kenya, a 2023 report documented that 73% of LGBTQI+ respondents experienced police harassment. Officers use criminalization laws to extract bribes, threaten outing, and commit sexual violence with impunity.

Forced anal examinations: Several African countries practice forced anal examinations—a form of torture recognized by UN human rights bodies—as "evidence" in sodomy cases. Egypt, Kenya, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia have documented use of this practice, which has no scientific validity and constitutes sexual violence.

Detention and torture: LGBTQI+ prisoners face torture, prolonged solitary confinement, denial of HIV treatment, and sexual violence. Transgender women are typically detained in male facilities where they face heightened abuse.

Denial of asylum: LGBTQI+ persons fleeing persecution often find no safety. Some African countries refuse asylum claims based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Others detain LGBTQI+ asylum seekers, exposing them to violence.

Social Violence

Beyond state violence, LGBTQI+ Africans face pervasive social persecution:

Family rejection: Many LGBTQI+ individuals experience family rejection, disownment, forced marriage to "cure" homosexuality, or violent "corrective" interventions. Parents subject children to conversion therapy, religious exorcisms, and physical abuse. Youth face homelessness when expelled from families.

Community violence: Vigilante violence includes mob attacks, "corrective" rape (particularly targeting lesbian and bisexual women), beatings, and murder. Media reporting of these crimes often blames victims while celebrating perpetrators.

Workplace discrimination: LGBTQI+ persons face employment discrimination, harassment, and termination. Most countries lack employment protection based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Economic exclusion forces many into informal sectors, underground economies, or survival sex work.

Housing discrimination: Landlords evict LGBTQI+ tenants or refuse housing based on sexual orientation or gender expression. Many LGBTQI+ persons are homeless or live in precarious, unsafe housing.

Healthcare denial: Healthcare providers refuse treatment, subject patients to abuse, breach confidentiality (outing patients), or provide "conversion therapy." Transgender persons cannot access gender-affirming healthcare. HIV prevention and treatment services often exclude LGBTQI+ populations despite elevated HIV prevalence.

Targeted Violence Against LGBTQI+ Women

Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women face intersecting oppressions:

"Corrective" rape: Men rape lesbian and bisexual women claiming to "cure" or "correct" their sexuality. This violence is rarely prosecuted; perpetrators enjoy impunity while victims face blame. In South Africa, documented cases include brutal murders of lesbian women including Eudy Simelane and Noxolo Nogwaza.

Family violence: Families subject lesbian daughters to forced marriage, religious rituals, beatings, and expulsion. Some families force lesbian daughters to bear children to "prove" heterosexuality.

Economic vulnerability: Lesbian and bisexual women face compounded employment and housing discrimination due to both sexism and homophobia. Many cannot access economic resources controlled by male relatives who reject them due to sexuality.

Exclusion from women's spaces: Lesbian and bisexual women face exclusion from some women's organizations, shelters, and services due to homophobia within feminist movements.

Transgender women's marginalization: Trans women face extreme violence, criminalization, healthcare denial, and erasure. Often misgendered and detained in male facilities, denied identity documents, and excluded from both women's and LGBTQI+ spaces, trans women navigate multiple layers of oppression.

HIV and Health Vulnerabilities

LGBTQI+ persons in Africa face elevated HIV prevalence yet encounter barriers to prevention and treatment:

- Men who have sex with men (MSM) face HIV prevalence rates 5-20 times higher than general populations
- Transgender women face even higher rates—up to 40% in some contexts
- Criminalization drives communities underground, away from healthcare
- Healthcare providers discriminate, breach confidentiality, and lack cultural competence
- Prevention programs cannot reach criminalized populations

- Homophobic violence increases HIV risk through sexual assault

Forces Driving Contemporary Homophobia

Colonial Legacy

Contemporary homophobia is rooted in colonialism. European colonizers imposed Christianity, criminalized African sexualities, and constructed race-based sexual hierarchies. Colonial administrators portrayed Africans as sexually deviant to justify domination while paradoxically imposing Victorian sexual morality.

Anti-sodomy laws were tools of colonial control—used to prosecute African chiefs, break social structures, and enforce European norms. These laws had no basis in pre-colonial legal systems, which generally did not criminalize private sexual behavior.

Post-independence, many African countries retained colonial laws. Rather than recognizing these as colonial impositions, nationalist leaders embraced them as "African tradition," erasing pre-colonial sexual diversity.

Contemporary Evangelical Influence

Since the 2000s, American evangelical organizations have intensified campaigns against LGBTQI+ rights in Africa. Following losses in battles over same-sex marriage and LGBTQI+ rights in the U.S. and Europe, these groups targeted Africa as more "winnable" territory.

Strategies include:

- Funding anti-LGBTQI+ legislation and lobbying
- Training African religious and political leaders in homophobic rhetoric
- Establishing media networks spreading anti-LGBTQI+ propaganda
- Framing LGBTQI+ rights as Western imperialism (despite their own foreign intervention)
- Using development aid and church partnerships as leverage
- Spreading conspiracy theories about "homosexual agenda" to "recruit" children

Organizations like the World Congress of Families, Alliance Defending Freedom, and Heartland Institute have documented operations in Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and other African countries. Scott Lively, an American evangelical who helped draft Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act, exemplifies this neocolonial intervention.

Political Scapegoating

African politicians deploy homophobia as political strategy:

Distraction from governance failures: Leaders facing corruption scandals, economic crises, or political opposition scapegoat LGBTQI+ communities, redirecting public anger toward vulnerable minorities rather than addressing real problems.

Nationalist rhetoric: Politicians claim defending "African values" against Western LGBTQI+ "imperialism," cynically appropriating anti-colonial language while accepting Western military aid, loans, and extractive investments.

Election strategy: Anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns mobilize religious voters, demonstrate morality credentials, and attack political opponents as insufficiently committed to "traditional values."

Authoritarian consolidation: Attacking LGBTQI+ communities tests and establishes authoritarian power. If governments can violate rights of one group with impunity, they can target others—journalists, opposition, civil society.

Religious Fundamentalism

Christian and Islamic fundamentalism fuels homophobia:

Christian fundamentalism: Evangelical and Pentecostal churches preach that homosexuality is sin, possession by demons, or Western corruption. Mega-churches wield political influence, pressuring governments to criminalize LGBTQI+ persons while enriching church leaders.

Islamic fundamentalism: Some Muslim leaders interpret Sharia to condemn homosexuality, though interpretations vary and Islamic jurisprudence historically showed more nuance. Political Islam uses homophobia to assert religious authority and challenge secular governance.

Interfaith unity against LGBTQI+ rights: In some contexts, Christian and Muslim leaders unite around anti-LGBTQI+ positions, finding common cause in sexual conservatism despite theological differences.

Anti-Gender Movements

Global anti-gender movements—networks opposing women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, comprehensive sexuality education, and reproductive rights—have intensified operations in Africa. These movements:

- Frame gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights as threats to family, nation, and religion
- Spread conspiracy theories about "gender ideology"
- Mobilize against comprehensive sexuality education
- Oppose reproductive rights and abortion access
- Target women human rights defenders and LGBTQI+ activists

Pre-Colonial Sexual and Gender Diversity

Confronting claims that homosexuality is "un-African" requires recovering erased histories:

Historical Evidence

Ancient Egypt: Evidence suggests same-sex relationships including the relationship between Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum, male royal servants depicted in intimate poses in their shared tomb (circa 2400 BCE).

Female Husbands: Multiple African societies recognized female-female marriages where women married other women, often in contexts of women's economic independence or after bearing children in heterosexual marriages. Documented in Kenya (Kikuyu, Kamba), Nigeria (Igbo), Sudan, and elsewhere.

Buganda Palace Officials: In the Kingdom of Buganda (present-day Uganda), palace officials maintained same-sex relationships that were accepted and recognized.

Gender Non-Conforming Roles: Many African societies recognized gender roles beyond binary male/female:

- Hausa 'yan daudu (Northern Nigeria) are men who adopt feminine dress, speech, and social roles
- Zulu shamanic traditions included gender-crossing
- Mombasa (Kenya) historically recognized diverse gender expressions

Same-Sex Practices: Anthropological research documented same-sex sexual practices in numerous African societies before colonial suppression:

- Age-graded same-sex relationships in East Africa
- Ritualized same-sex practices in initiations
- Same-sex relationships among miners in South Africa
- Women's same-sex relationships in boarding schools and polygamous households

Colonial Erasure

Colonizers systematically erased these histories:

- Destroying indigenous records and oral histories
- Imposing Christian sexual morality
- Criminalizing diverse sexualities and gender expressions
- Training African elites in European sexual values
- Embedding homophobia in colonial education systems

Post-colonial African governments often continued this erasure, defining "African culture" in opposition to sexual diversity despite historical evidence to the contrary.

Queer Resistance and Organizing

Despite persecution, LGBTQI+ Africans are organizing, resisting, and building powerful movements.

Grassroots Organizing

LGBTQI+ organizations operate across Africa—many underground, some openly:

Kenya: GALCK (Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya), NGLHRC (National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission), and others provide legal support, advocacy, and community services.

South Africa: Dozens of organizations including Triangle Project, OUT LGBT Well-being, and Iranti work on advocacy, healthcare, and violence prevention despite high levels of homophobic violence.

Uganda: Organizations like Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) continue operating despite severe repression.

West Africa: Organizations across Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon work underground providing services and advocacy.

North Africa: Organizations in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt operate in highly repressive contexts.

Legal Advocacy

LGBTQI+ activists pursue legal challenges:

Constitutional litigation: Challenging discriminatory laws in constitutional courts. While most cases have failed, litigation creates visibility and establishes precedents.

Regional mechanisms: Bringing cases to African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.

International advocacy: Engaging UN human rights bodies, Universal Periodic Review, and treaty bodies to pressure governments.

Community Support and Services

Organizations provide critical services:

- Safe spaces for community gathering
- HIV prevention and treatment
- Mental health support
- Legal aid
- Emergency assistance for those facing violence
- Documentation of violations

Cultural Production

LGBTQI+ Africans use art, film, literature, and music to challenge stigma and assert visibility:

- Films like "Rafiki" (Kenya), "The Wound" (South Africa), and "Stories of Our Lives" (Kenya) depict LGBTQI+ African lives
- Writers including Binyavanga Wainaina, NoViolet Bulawayo, and others center queer African experiences
- Artists create work celebrating queer African identities

Pan-African LGBTQI+ Solidarity

Regional networks connect activists across borders:

- Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL)
- Pan-Africa ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association)
- African regional convenings creating solidarity and strategy

Afrofeminism and LGBTQI+ Liberation

Intersectionality Demands LGBTQI+ Inclusion

Afrofeminism rooted in intersectionality must center LGBTQI+ rights. Intersectionality—pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw and expanded by queer Black feminists—recognizes that oppressions overlap and interact. A Black lesbian in Uganda experiences not gender or sexuality in isolation but their intersection, creating unique forms of oppression requiring specific responses.

Feminist movements cannot achieve liberation for "all women" while excluding lesbian, bisexual, and trans women. Such exclusion perpetuates oppression and fragments our movements. Liberation means liberation for all.

Challenging Heteronormativity and Patriarchy

LGBTQI+ exclusion upholds the patriarchal systems that oppress all women. Homophobia and transphobia enforce rigid gender roles, police women's sexuality, and punish those who transgress feminine norms—harming all women, not just queer women.

The violence targeting lesbian women—"corrective" rape—is fundamentally about male control of women's bodies and sexuality. It asserts that women exist for men's sexual access, that women cannot form lives independent of men, that women's sexuality must serve patriarchy. Challenging this violence requires challenging the patriarchal assumption that men own women's bodies.

Bodily Autonomy as Foundational

Feminist commitment to bodily autonomy—the right to control one's own body—necessarily includes sexual and gender autonomy. If women have the right to control reproduction, they have the right to control sexuality. If people have the right to bodily integrity, they have the right to gender self-determination.

The same forces opposing abortion, contraception, and comprehensive sexuality education oppose LGBTQI+ rights. The same religious fundamentalists, the same politicians, the same rhetoric. These struggles are inseparable.

Tensions and Contradictions

Yet LGBTQI+ inclusion in African feminist movements remains contested. Some feminists argue that centering LGBTQI+ issues:

- Alienates "mainstream" women
- Provides ammunition for opponents who paint feminism as "Western" or "immoral"
- Distracts from "core" women's rights issues
- Threatens funding from conservative donors

These arguments mirror debates in earlier feminist movements about whether to include race, class, or other "divisive" issues. History shows that liberation cannot be built on excluding the most marginalized.

Queer Feminism and Trans Feminism

Queer feminist and trans feminist frameworks, developed by LGBTQI+ feminists of color, offer vital theoretical contributions:

- Challenging gender binaries and essentialism
- Centering pleasure and desire in liberation
- Analyzing state violence and criminalization
- Connecting struggles across identities
- Refusing respectability politics

African queer and trans feminists including Sokari Ekine, Zanele Muholi, and others articulate Afrofeminist frameworks that center sexual and gender liberation.

RFLD's Position on LGBTQI+ Rights

RFLD unequivocally supports LGBTQI+ rights as integral to women's liberation and human rights. Our position is grounded in:

Intersectional feminism: We cannot achieve justice for some women while others face violence and exclusion.

Human rights principles: All persons have inherent dignity and rights regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Historical truth: Sexual and gender diversity are part of African histories, not Western imports.

Strategic solidarity: Our movements are stronger when we stand together against all forms of oppression.

Lived reality: LGBTQI+ women are part of RFLD networks, and we defend all our members.

Our Work

- Protection: Supporting LGBTQI+ women human rights defenders facing violence
- Advocacy: Challenging discriminatory laws and policies
- Capacity building: Training feminist organizations on LGBTQI+ inclusion
- Coalition building: Creating solidarities across women's rights and LGBTQI+ movements
- Documentation: Recording violations against LGBTQI+ persons
- Dialogue: Creating safe spaces for movement conversations about inclusion

Policy Recommendations

To African Governments:

- Repeal colonial-era laws criminalizing same-sex relationships
- Enact comprehensive anti-discrimination protections including sexual orientation and gender identity
- Recognize legal gender recognition for transgender persons
- Investigate and prosecute violence against LGBTQI+ persons
- End police harassment and torture

- Provide access to healthcare including HIV services and gender-affirming care
- Reject foreign evangelical influence on legislation

To African Union and Regional Bodies:

- Issue strong statements defending LGBTQI+ rights as human rights
- Monitor violations and hold member states accountable
- Interpret African Charter protections to include sexual orientation and gender identity
- Support LGBTQI+ organizations and activists

To Donors:

- Fund LGBTQI+ organizations in Africa directly
- Support organizations working at intersections of women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights
- Provide security support for activists facing threats
- Fund legal challenges to discriminatory laws
- Support community-led responses rather than external interventions

To Feminist Movements:

- Center LGBTQI+ women's leadership
- Challenge homophobia and transphobia within movements
- Build explicit solidarities with LGBTQI+ struggles
- Include LGBTQI+ issues in advocacy agendas
- Provide safe spaces for LGBTQI+ members
- Confront exclusionary feminism

To Faith Communities:

- Challenge interpretations that condemn LGBTQI+ persons
- Protect LGBTQI+ members from violence and exclusion
- Counter fundamentalist rhetoric
- Provide theological frameworks affirming diversity

No Liberation Without LGBTQI+ Liberation

The claim that homosexuality is "un-African" is ahistorical, serving political and religious agendas rather than reflecting reality. Sexual and gender diversity have always existed in Africa. What is imported is contemporary homophobia and transphobia—legacies of colonialism amplified by evangelical neocolonialism.

True decolonization requires rejecting colonial laws criminalizing same-sex relationships. True Pan-Africanism requires solidarity with all Africans, including LGBTQI+ Africans. True feminism requires liberation for all women, including lesbian, bisexual, and trans women.

The forces oppressing LGBTQI+ persons—religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, neocolonialism—are the same forces oppressing all marginalized communities. Our liberation is bound together.

As feminist Audre Lorde wrote: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."

African liberation will be queer and feminist, or it will not be liberation at all.

ARTICLE 10: ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AFRICA

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction: Economics as a Site of Liberation

Economic justice is central to the liberation of African women. Poverty is not gender-neutral—women in Africa face higher rates of poverty, lower wages, less access to resources, and greater economic vulnerability than men. These disparities are not natural or inevitable; they result from deliberate economic structures that devalue women's labor, deny women control over resources, and concentrate wealth and power in men's hands.

Mainstream development approaches often focus on "women's economic empowerment" through microfinance, entrepreneurship training, or inclusion in exploitative labor markets. While individual women may benefit, these interventions leave oppressive economic structures intact. True economic justice requires transformation: challenging capitalism's exploitation, redistributing resources and power, valuing care work, ensuring land and property rights, and building economies centered on collective wellbeing rather than profit extraction.

This article examines the economic realities facing African women, analyzes structural roots of economic inequality, critiques mainstream development approaches, documents women's economic organizing, and proposes feminist economic justice strategies that transform rather than tinker with economic systems.

The Economic Realities Facing African Women

The Gender Wage Gap

Women in Africa earn approximately 30% less than men for comparable work—one of the world's largest gender wage gaps. This gap reflects and perpetuates women's poverty and economic dependence.

Sectoral segregation: Women are concentrated in low-paying sectors (agriculture, domestic work, informal trade) while men dominate higher-paying formal sectors (mining, manufacturing, public administration, finance). Even within sectors, women occupy lower positions—in agriculture, women are subsistence farmers while men are commercial farmers; in education, women teach primary school while men are university professors.

Unpaid care work: Women perform the majority of unpaid care and domestic work—caring for children, elderly, sick; cooking, cleaning, water collection, fuel gathering. This unpaid labor, essential for economic functioning, goes unrecognized and uncompensated while limiting women's time for paid work, education, political participation, and rest.

Time-use studies show African women work longer total hours than men when paid and unpaid labor are combined, yet earn far less income. In rural areas, women may work 16-18 hour days during planting and harvest seasons.

Discrimination: Employers pay women less than men for the same work, citing stereotypes that women are less committed or less productive. Women face barriers to hiring, promotion, and leadership positions. Pregnancy and motherhood trigger discrimination including termination, denial of promotion, and workplace harassment.

Informal Sector Marginalization

The vast majority of African women work in the informal economy—street vending, market trading, home-based production, domestic work—sectors characterized by low pay, no benefits, no job security, and vulnerability to harassment and violence.

Informal economy statistics: Women comprise 85-95% of informal economy workers in Africa. In some countries, over 90% of women workers are informal compared to 60-70% of men.

Characteristics of informality:

- No written contracts or labor protections
- No minimum wage enforcement
- No social security, health insurance, or retirement benefits
- No paid leave (sick, maternity, vacation)
- Vulnerability to confiscation of goods by authorities
- Exposure to weather, violence, and sexual harassment
- No access to credit or capital for business expansion
- Unpredictable, unstable income

Street vendors and market traders: Women dominate informal trade, selling a range of products, including produce, cooked food, household items, and clothing, in markets and on the streets. They face constant harassment from police and municipal authorities who confiscate goods, demand bribes, evict vendors, and demolish informal markets—destroying women's livelihoods. In 2023 alone, documented evictions in Lagos, Nairobi, Harare, and Accra displaced tens of thousands of women traders.

Domestic workers: Millions of African women work as domestic workers (house cleaners, cooks, nannies, caregivers), one of the most exploited sectors. Domestic workers face:

- Long hours (many work 14-18 hours daily, 6-7 days weekly)
- Below minimum wage pay or no pay (especially live-in workers)
- Physical, sexual, and psychological abuse
- Confiscation of identity documents
- Denial of rest, food, and healthcare
- Legal exclusion (many labor laws exempt domestic work)

Land Inequality

Land is fundamental to economic security in largely agrarian African economies, yet women own only 15% of land across the continent. This land inequality creates economic vulnerability and perpetuates poverty.

Legal discrimination: Many African countries' statutory and customary laws deny women land ownership. Common patterns include:

- Land inheritance restricted to male relatives
- Women's land access dependent on relationships with men (fathers, husbands, sons)
- Women requiring male relatives' permission for land transactions
- Women losing land rights upon widowhood or divorce
- Customary authorities (predominantly male) controlling land allocation
- Community land tenure vesting control in male household heads

Even where laws guarantee women's land rights, implementation is weak. Women lack information about rights, cannot afford legal processes, face bias from male judges and customary authorities, and risk social ostracism for asserting claims.

Economic consequences: Land inequality creates cascading economic disadvantages:

- Women cannot access agricultural credit (requires land collateral)
- Women cannot make long-term agricultural investments (soil conservation, tree planting, irrigation)
- Women have less decision-making power in households and communities
- Women face destitution when marriages end or husbands die
- Women are more vulnerable to displacement during conflicts or development projects

Financial Exclusion

Only 37% of African women have bank accounts compared to 48% of men. Financial exclusion limits women's economic opportunities and security.

Barriers to financial services:

- Distance to banks (especially in rural areas)
- Identification requirements (women less likely to have IDs)
- Minimum balance requirements
- Bank fees
- Requirements for male relatives' permission
- Banking hours coinciding with work obligations
- Illiteracy and lack of financial education

Credit access: Women entrepreneurs struggle to access credit for business development:

- Banks require collateral (land, property) women don't own
- Male relatives must co-sign loans

- Banks perceive women's businesses as higher risk
- Women lack business networks that facilitate credit access
- Women's businesses are often unregistered, making formal credit impossible

Consequences: Without access to credit and savings, women cannot:

- Invest in business expansion
- Weather economic shocks
- Pay school fees
- Access healthcare during emergencies
- Accumulate assets for old age

Care Work Crisis

Women perform the vast majority of unpaid care work—estimated 10 times more than men in some African countries. This unpaid labor, valued at trillions of dollars if compensated, subsidizes economies while impoverishing women.

Time poverty: Excessive care responsibilities create time poverty—women lack time for paid work, education, political participation, rest, leisure. Girls pulled from school to help with care work perpetuates intergenerational poverty.

Health impacts: Physically demanding care work (water carrying, firewood collection, farming, childcare) causes musculoskeletal problems, exhaustion, and chronic health issues. Women sacrifice their own health caring for others.

Economic opportunity costs: Hours spent on unpaid care cannot be spent earning income. Women's concentration in part-time, low-paid, informal work reflects care responsibilities that prevent full-time employment.

Invisible labor: Care work is unrecognized in GDP calculations, policy planning, and economic discourse. The essential labor that reproduces society and sustains economies is rendered invisible.

Structural Roots of Economic Injustice

Colonial Economic Exploitation

Contemporary economic inequalities are rooted in colonial extraction. European colonizers restructured African economies to serve colonial interests:

Resource extraction: Colonizers extracted minerals, timber, agricultural commodities with no compensation to African communities. Infrastructure (roads, rails, ports) served extraction rather than African development.

Forced labor: Colonial regimes extracted labor through slavery, forced cultivation, taxation requiring cash that could only be earned through wage labor in colonial enterprises. This disrupted African economic and social systems.

Cash crop economies: Colonizers forced production of export crops (cotton, coffee, cocoa, groundnuts, palm oil) for European markets, displacing food production and creating economic dependency.

Land theft: Colonial authorities seized the most fertile land for white settlers and plantations, displacing African communities onto marginal lands.

Gendered impacts: Colonial economic restructuring had specific gendered dimensions:

- Men were recruited/forced into wage labor while women maintained subsistence agriculture
- Colonial authorities dealt only with men regarding land, agriculture, trade
- Women lost economic autonomy as cash crop economies favored men
- Women's unpaid labor subsidized low colonial wages paid to men

Neocolonial Exploitation

Post-independence, African countries remained trapped in exploitative economic relationships:

Debt: International financial institutions imposed loans with conditions (structural adjustment programs) that:

- Privatized public services
- Cut social spending (health, education, welfare)
- Removed subsidies on food and fuel
- Devalued currencies
- Opened markets to foreign competition
- Prioritized debt payment over social investment

These policies devastated African economies while enriching foreign creditors. Women, as primary users of public services and safety nets, suffered disproportionately.

Unfair trade: Global trade rules favor wealthy nations:

- African exports (raw materials) face low prices
- African imports (manufactured goods) face high prices
- Agricultural subsidies in the Global North undercut African farmers
- African countries cannot protect domestic industries
- Multinational corporations extract profits while avoiding taxation

Resource extraction: Foreign corporations continue extracting African resources—oil, gas, minerals, timber, agricultural land—with minimal benefit to Africans. Profits flow abroad while environmental destruction, displacement, and poverty remain local.

Land grabs: Foreign investors and domestic elites grab land for large-scale agriculture, carbon offset projects, conservation, and speculation, displacing small-scale farmers—predominantly women.

Capitalism's Exploitation

The capitalist economic system generates and requires inequality. Women's economic marginalization is not incidental but functional to capitalism:

Cheap labor: Women's concentration in informal, unregulated sectors provides cheap, flexible labor with no benefits or protections. Capitalist enterprises profit from this exploitation.

Reproductive labor: Women's unpaid care work reproduces the workforce (bearing and raising children, caring for working-age adults, supporting elderly) at no cost to capital. If this labor were compensated, it would dramatically reduce profits.

Reserve army of labor: Women's informal sector participation creates a reserve labor pool that can be drawn into formal work during expansions and expelled during contractions, maintaining downward pressure on all wages.

Consumer markets: Women's responsibility for household consumption makes them targets for markets selling household goods, food, clothing, creating profit opportunities.

Ideological function: Gender stereotypes portraying women as naturally suited for low-paid, nurturing work justify economic exploitation as biological destiny rather than structural inequality.

Patriarchal Control of Resources

Patriarchy concentrates economic resources and decision-making power in men's hands:

Male breadwinner ideology: Cultural norms positioning men as primary earners and women as economic dependents justify paying women less and excluding women from economic opportunities.

Resource control: Customary and legal systems vest property ownership, inheritance, and economic decision-making in men. Even in households where women earn income, men often control that income.

Unpaid labor burden: Assigning care work to women frees men for income-generating activities while restricting women's economic participation.

Violence as economic control: Men use violence to control women's economic activities, labor, and resources. Intimate partner violence often involves economic abuse—controlling money, preventing work, destroying women's businesses.

Critiquing Mainstream Development Approaches

Microfinance: Empowerment or Exploitation?

Microfinance—providing small loans to poor women—is celebrated as women's empowerment strategy. Yet critical analysis reveals significant problems:

Debt burden: Microcredit creates debt without addressing poverty's structural causes. Many women borrow for consumption (food, school fees, healthcare) rather than business investment, creating debt traps. Interest rates, though lower than informal moneylenders, still represent significant burdens.

Responsibility without resources: Microfinance makes individual women responsible for solving poverty without addressing structural inequalities. It privatizes poverty response while withdrawing public support.

Increased work burden: Microcredit-funded businesses add to women's already overwhelming workloads without reducing care responsibilities or providing support services.

Gender relations: Some research finds microcredit increases domestic violence as male partners feel threatened by women's income or feel that women are not entitled to loans.

Neoliberal logic: Microfinance reflects neoliberal assumptions that poverty results from a lack of entrepreneurship rather than structural exploitation, that market participation solves inequality rather than market regulation and redistribution.

Corporate "Women's Empowerment"

Corporations increasingly promote women's empowerment through:

- Hiring women in supply chains
- Promoting women to leadership
- Marketing to women consumers
- Funding women's empowerment programs

This corporate feminism promotes individual advancement within exploitative systems rather than transforming those systems.

Exploitation dressed as empowerment: Employing women in export processing zones, garment factories, or agribusiness at poverty wages in dangerous conditions is not empowerment—it's exploitation. Yet corporations celebrate this as "economic opportunity."

Elite advancement: Promoting individual women to corporate leadership benefits those women while leaving oppressive structures intact, and most women are still impoverished.

Greenwashing and pinkwashing: Corporate women's empowerment initiatives distract from corporate exploitation, labor rights violations, environmental destruction, and tax avoidance that impoverish African women.

Instrumentalizing Women

Development discourse often instrumentalizes women—valuing women's empowerment for what it achieves for development rather than as a right:

- "Invest in women because it boosts GDP growth"
- "Empower women because they invest in children"

- "Include women for better development outcomes"

This framing treats women as means to other ends rather than recognizing women's rights and wellbeing as the ends themselves. It justifies investing in women only insofar as it serves other agendas, making women's rights contingent and conditional.

Women's Economic Organizing and Alternatives

Despite oppressive economic structures, African women are organizing powerful movements for economic justice.

Informal Sector Organizing

Women informal workers are organizing unions, associations, and cooperatives:

StreetNet International: Global alliance of street vendors, including a strong African presence. StreetNet advocates for vendors' rights, organizes against evictions, and promotes policy reform.

Domestic workers unions: Countries including South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya have organized domestic workers' unions fighting for labor rights, minimum wages, and legal protections.

Market traders' associations: Women traders form associations for collective bargaining, mutual aid, and political advocacy. These associations negotiate with authorities, resist evictions, and provide business support.

Cooperative Economics

Women are building cooperative economic models:

Agricultural cooperatives: Women farmers form cooperatives for collective production, processing, and marketing, thereby achieving better prices and access to shared resources.

Savings and credit cooperatives: Self-organized savings groups (stokvels in South Africa, chamas in Kenya, tontines in West Africa) provide mutual financial support, bypassing exclusionary formal financial systems.

Production cooperatives: Women form cooperatives for crafts, textiles, food processing, and services—sharing equipment, pooling labor, and engaging in collective marketing.

Land Rights Movements

Women are organizing to secure land rights:

Legal advocacy: Organizations pursue law reforms guaranteeing women's land rights, test cases challenging discriminatory practices, and community legal education.

Documentation: Women document their land use and contributions to establish claims and counter patriarchal assertions that women don't farm.

Collective action: Women organize collectively to resist land grabs, demand land allocation, and assert customary claims.

Care Work Recognition

Feminist organizations advocate for recognizing, reducing, and redistributing care work:

Recognition: Documenting care work's economic value, including it in GDP calculations, and policy discussions.

Reduction: Investing in public services (water, electricity, healthcare, childcare) that reduce household labor burdens.

Redistribution: Challenging gendered care work allocation, promoting men's participation in care, providing parental leave, and flexible work policies.

Reward: Compensating care workers fairly, providing social protection, and ensuring decent work conditions.

Challenging Extractive Industries

Women's environmental justice movements challenge extractive industries:

Anti-mining organizing: Women organize against mining projects that destroy livelihoods, contaminate water, and displace communities.

Land defense: Women defend community lands against grabbing for large-scale agriculture, conservation, or speculation.

Just transition advocacy: Women demand that transitions from fossil fuels include just economic alternatives, not just job losses.

Feminist Economic Justice Vision

Economic System Transformation

Feminist economic justice requires moving from:

- Extraction to regeneration: Economies that regenerate social and ecological systems rather than extracting until exhausted
- Growth to wellbeing: Measuring success by collective wellbeing rather than GDP growth
- Profit to care: Centering care for people and planet rather than profit accumulation
- Competition to cooperation: Building cooperative, solidarity economic relations
- Accumulation to distribution: Redistributing wealth rather than concentrating it

Universal Basic Services

Ensuring everyone has access to quality public services:

- Universal healthcare
- Free education through university
- Public transportation
- Water and sanitation
- Electricity and internet

- Social housing
- Childcare and eldercare

Universal public services reduce inequality, support women's economic participation, and recognize social provision as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden.

Living Wage and Labor Rights

- Minimum wages are sufficient for a decent living
- Equal pay for equal work
- Labor protections for informal sector workers
- Domestic workers' rights and protections
- Paid family leave
- Limits on working hours
- Safe working conditions
- Freedom of association and collective bargaining

Land and Resource Rights

- Women's equal land ownership, inheritance, and control
- Agrarian reform redistributing land to the landless
- Community control over natural resources
- Recognition of indigenous and customary rights
- Protection from land grabs and displacement

Care Work Support

- Public investment in care infrastructure (childcare centers, eldercare facilities, community kitchens)
- Paid family leave
- Flexible work arrangements
- Fair compensation for care workers
- Social protection for unpaid caregivers
- Redistribution of care responsibilities to men and the state

Solidarity Economy

Building economic relations based on cooperation, mutual aid, and collective well-being:

- Worker cooperatives
- Community land trusts
- Time banking and mutual aid networks
- Social enterprises prioritizing wellbeing over profit
- Ethical supply chains and fair trade

Debt Cancellation and Economic Sovereignty

- Cancelling illegitimate African debt
- Regulating capital flows and foreign investment

- Protecting domestic industries and food sovereignty
- Challenging unfair trade rules
- Taxing wealth and corporations fairly
- Controlling extractive industries for public benefit

RFLD's Economic Justice Work

RFLD integrates economic justice across programs:

Women's land rights: Advocating for legal reforms, supporting women claiming land, documenting women's land contributions.

Informal sector support: Building partnerships with informal workers' organizations, advocating for policy reforms, providing legal support.

Economic literacy: Training women in economic analysis, budgeting, financial management, and business skills.

Challenging corporate exploitation: Documenting labor rights violations, supporting workers organizing, advocating for corporate accountability.

Feminist economic alternatives: Supporting cooperatives, savings groups, and solidarity economy initiatives.

Policy advocacy: Engaging governments and regional bodies on economic policy, budget allocation, and development strategies.

Policy Recommendations

To African Governments:

- Guarantee women's land rights through law reform and implementation
- Extend labor protections to informal sector and domestic workers
- Invest in public services (healthcare, education, childcare, water, transportation)
- Implement progressive taxation and wealth redistribution
- Support cooperatives and solidarity economy initiatives
- Regulate extractive industries and protect communities
- Provide universal social protection
- Ensure living minimum wages

To International Financial Institutions:

- Cancel African debt
- End structural adjustment conditionalities
- Support public services rather than privatization
- Regulate multinational corporations
- Reform unfair trade rules
- Support African economic sovereignty

To Donors:

- Fund feminist economic justice organizing
- Support informal workers' movements
- Invest in public services rather than privatization
- Fund research on feminist economics and alternatives

To Private Sector:

- Pay living wages and ensure decent work conditions
- Respect workers' rights to organize
- Stop land grabs and environmental destruction
- Pay fair taxes
- End gender discrimination in employment and pay

Economic Liberation is Feminist Liberation

Economic justice and gender justice are inseparable. Women cannot be free while impoverished, economically dependent, and locked out of resources and opportunities. Financial systems cannot be just while exploiting women's labor, appropriating women's care work, and denying women economic autonomy.

Feminist economic justice requires transformation—challenging capitalism's exploitation, redistributing resources and power, valuing care work, and building economies centered on collective wellbeing.

The path to economic justice runs through women's liberation. The path to women's liberation runs through economic justice. Our struggles are one.

ARTICLE 11: INTERGENERATIONAL FEMINISM

Bridging the Gap Between Generations

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction: The Power and Challenge of Multiple Generations

African feminist movements today include multiple generations—elders who fought liberation struggles and built foundational organizations, middle-generation activists who led democratization movements, and younger feminists coming of age in digital eras. This multi-generational presence is a source of tremendous strength, bringing diverse experiences, skills, and perspectives. Yet it also creates tensions around strategies, priorities, leadership, and visions of feminism.

Inter-generational dynamics within movements are often characterized by mutual frustration: older feminists feel that their contributions are being erased and their wisdom is being ignored; younger feminists feel excluded from leadership and constrained by outdated approaches. These tensions, while real, are also manufactured and amplified by systems that benefit from fragmented movements. Patriarchy, capitalism, and other oppressive systems gain when feminist movements fracture along generational lines rather than building cross-generational solidarity.

Intergenerational feminism—deliberate practice of bringing multiple generations into collaborative, mutually respectful relationships—is essential for movement sustainability and power. It requires that older feminists make space for emerging leaders while younger feminists honor the groundwork laid by previous generations. It demands honest dialogue about tensions, a shared analysis of the structural forces that create generational divisions, and a collective commitment to bridge-building.

This article examines generational dynamics within African feminist movements, analyzes sources of intergenerational tensions, documents successful bridge-building efforts, and proposes strategies for building truly intergenerational feminist movements that honor all ages.

The Generations in African Feminism

The Liberation Generation

Context: Women who came of age during or shortly after independence struggles (1950s-1980s) often participated in nationalist liberation movements, built post-colonial institutions, and established first-wave women's rights organizations.

Contributions:

- Challenged colonial systems and built independent nations
- Established women's rights as a political issue
- Created foundational organizations and legal frameworks
- Linked women's rights to broader liberation struggles

- Built regional and international feminist networks
- Laid groundwork for all subsequent feminist organizing

Perspectives shaped by:

- Direct experience of colonialism and liberation struggles
- Building movements without internet or global connectivity
- Operating under authoritarian one-party states
- Economic scarcity and structural adjustment
- Sexism within nationalist movements

Examples: Wangari Maathai (Kenya), Albertina Sisulu (South Africa), Charlotte Maxeke (South Africa), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Nigeria)

The Democracy Generation

Context: Women who came of age during democratization movements (1980s-2000s), fighting for multi-party democracy, human rights, and good governance after decades of authoritarian rule.

Contributions:

- Led democracy and human rights movements
- Established women's human rights frameworks
- Expanded women's political participation and representation
- Built regional feminist networks and institutions
- Professionalized women's rights organizations
- Integrated gender into development and governance

Perspectives shaped by:

- Transitions from authoritarian to democratic governance
- Emergence of civil society and NGO sector
- HIV/AIDS crisis and responses
- Structural adjustment and economic liberalization
- Growth of international women's rights frameworks (Beijing Platform, CEDAW)

Examples: Graça Machel (Mozambique), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (South Africa), Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi (Nigeria)

The Digital Generation

Context: Women who came of age in the digital era (2000s-present), using the internet and social media for organizing, connected to global movements, facing new opportunities and threats.

Contributions:

- Leveraging digital tools for rapid mobilization

- Building transnational solidarity and movements
- Centering intersectionality and diverse identities
- Challenging respectability politics and expanding feminism's scope
- Creating alternative media and cultural production
- Documenting violations in real-time
- Decolonial analysis and critique

Perspectives shaped by:

- Digital connectivity and social media organizing
- Global social movements (#MeToo, Black Lives Matter, climate justice)
- Rising authoritarianism and shrinking civic space
- Economic precarity and youth unemployment
- Climate crisis and environmental destruction
- Globalization of culture and politics

Examples: Vanessa Nakate (Uganda), Yassmin Abdel-Magied (Sudan/Australia), Felowise Waithaka (Kenya)

Sources of Intergenerational Tensions

Different Organizing Approaches

Hierarchical vs. Horizontal: Older feminists often built hierarchical organizational structures (executive directors, boards, formal membership) typical of their era. Younger feminists favor horizontal, non-hierarchical organizing (collectives, networks, rotating leadership). Neither is inherently superior—each has strengths and limitations—but differences create friction.

Formal vs. Informal: Established organizations have formal registration, funding contracts, audit requirements, and strategic plans. Younger activists sometimes organize informally through social movements, hashtags, and temporary coalitions. Tensions emerge when older feminists question the legitimacy or sustainability of younger activists, while younger activists critique the bureaucracy of older organizations.

Slow institution-building vs. Rapid mobilization: Older feminists invested years building institutions, legal frameworks, and sustained programs. Younger feminists prioritize rapid mobilization around urgent issues. The former creates lasting infrastructure; the latter generates immediate visibility. Movements need both, but each generation may undervalue the other's approach.

Leadership and Succession

Entrenched leadership: Some older feminists hold leadership positions for decades, thereby preventing younger feminists from advancing to leadership roles. Whether due to lack of succession planning, scarcity of funding creating competition, or reluctance to relinquish power, this creates resentment and limits organizational renewal.

Disrespect for experience: Some younger feminists dismiss older feminists as outdated, conservative, or irrelevant, failing to recognize contributions and wisdom. This erasure hurts movements by losing institutional memory and lived experience.

Tokenization: Organizations sometimes include younger feminists in tokenistic ways—inviting them to speak but not to lead, consulting them but not empowering them to make decisions—creating frustration and superficial inclusion.

Communication and Technology

Digital divide: Not all older feminists are technologically savvy, while younger feminists organize primarily through digital platforms. This can exclude older feminists from digital conversations, while younger feminists miss in-person organizing skills.

Different communication norms: Older feminists may prefer formal communication (such as letters and official statements), while younger feminists often use social media, memes, and hashtags. These differences can hinder collaboration.

Political Analysis and Strategy

Respectability vs. Radical: Older feminists, having fought to gain credibility, may favor respectable strategies (formal advocacy, policy engagement) while younger feminists embrace radical tactics (protest, disruption, confrontation). These reflect different contexts but can create conflict.

Single-issue vs. Intersectional: Older women's movements sometimes focused on gender inequality as the primary issue. Younger feminists insist on intersectionality—simultaneously addressing gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability. Older feminists may view this as diluting the focus; younger feminists, on the other hand, see single-issue feminism as exclusionary.

Reform vs. Transformation: Some older feminists advocate reforming existing systems while younger feminists demand the transformation of oppressive structures. These philosophical differences reflect varied experiences and analyses.

Resources and Recognition

Funding access: Established organizations with older leadership access most donor funding, leaving younger activists underfunded. Donors prefer funding organizations with track records, inadvertently privileging older generations.

Recognition and awards: Older feminists receive most recognition and awards, while younger activists' contributions are overlooked. This can breed resentment on both sides.

Platform access: Media, conferences, and policy processes often feature older, more established feminists, excluding younger voices.

Structural Forces Creating Division

These tensions are not merely personal but structured by systems that benefit from fragmented movements:

Funding scarcity: Limited resources create competition between generations rather than collaboration.

Ageism: Both youth-worship and elder-dismissal reflect ageist cultures that devalue people based on age.

Sexism: Patriarchal societies offer women such limited power that intergenerational conflicts over scarce positions become fierce.

Neoliberalism: Individualistic cultures emphasize personal advancement over collective movement-building, encouraging competition.

Planned obsolescence: Systems that benefit from women's oppression deliberately try to fragment movements by amplifying divisions.

The Case for Intergenerational Feminism

Movement Sustainability

Movements cannot sustain across time without intergenerational continuity. When older feminists monopolize leadership, movements face crisis when they retire. When younger feminists dismiss history, they repeat past mistakes. Intergenerational movements build sustainable infrastructure while adapting to changing contexts.

Comprehensive Analysis and Strategy

Multiple generations bring diverse experiences enriching collective analysis:

- Older feminists provide historical perspective and pattern recognition
- Younger feminists identify emerging issues and opportunities
- Mid-generation activists bridge and synthesize

Comprehensive strategies draw on this diversity—combining insider advocacy (requiring long-term relationships) with disruptive protest (requiring fresh energy), formal institutions (requiring sustained building) with fluid movements (requiring rapid adaptation).

Stronger Collective Power

Fragmented movements are weaker. When generations compete, opponents exploit divisions. United intergenerational movements command more resources, represent broader constituencies, and wield greater political power.

Emotional and Psychological Support

Feminist organizing is demanding work facing violence, burnout, and trauma. Intergenerational movements provide mutual care:

- Older feminists mentor younger activists navigating challenges
- Younger feminists energize tired movements with fresh commitment
- Mid-generation activists support both sides

Honoring Our Lineages

We stand on the shoulders of foremothers who fought under far more oppressive conditions with far fewer resources. Honoring their contributions is not about romanticizing the past but recognizing that our current possibilities exist because of their struggles. Equally, elders must remember that younger feminists are facing crises (climate change, digital surveillance, neoliberal precarity) requiring new responses.

Successful Intergenerational Organizing Models

Deliberate Succession Planning

Organizations practicing proactive succession planning:

- RFLD's leadership development programs train emerging leaders while learning from experienced leaders
- Feminist organizations creating leadership transition plans years in advance
- Regional feminist funds prioritizing funding for young feminist activists

Mentorship and Reverse Mentorship

Traditional mentorship: Older feminists mentoring younger activists in organizational development, fundraising, policy advocacy, and personal resilience.

Reverse mentorship: Younger feminists mentoring older activists in digital organizing, social media, emerging issues, and new frameworks.

Mutual mentorship recognizes that everyone has knowledge to share.

Co-Leadership Models

Organizations sharing leadership across generations:

- Co-director models pairing experienced and emerging leaders
- Intergenerational boards and committees
- Decision-making processes ensuring multiple generations participate

Intergenerational Learning Spaces

Creating spaces for cross-generational dialogue:

- Workshops where elders share histories and younger feminists share contemporary analysis
- Story circles where all ages share experiences
- Feminist schools bringing together multi-generational participants
- Conferences designed for intergenerational exchange rather than age-segregated tracks

Resource Sharing

Established organizations supporting emerging activists:

- Providing office space and infrastructure
- Fiscal sponsorship for young activists unable to secure formal registration

- Fundraising partnerships where established organizations help younger activists access donors
- Technology and equipment sharing

Collaborative Campaigns

Joint campaigns bringing together multiple generations:

- 16 Days of Activism combining established organizations' resources with younger activists' energy
- Coalition campaigns where different generations contribute different strategies
- Intergenerational delegations to policy forums

Principles for Building Intergenerational Feminism

Mutual Respect

Recognizing contributions and the wisdom of all ages. This means:

- Older feminists respecting younger activists' knowledge, analysis, and leadership
- Younger feminists respect elders' experience, sacrifice, and achievements
- Everyone resisting ageist stereotypes and assumptions

Power Sharing

Deliberately redistributing power across generations:

- Making space in leadership for multiple generations
- Ensuring decision-making processes include diverse ages
- Distributing resources (funding, platforms, recognition) intergenerationally
- Creating term limits and leadership transitions

Embracing Diversity of Strategies

Recognizing that movements need multiple approaches:

- Formal advocacy AND protest
- Institution-building AND movement mobilization
- Long-term organizing AND rapid response
- Insider engagement AND outsider pressure

Rather than fighting over which approach is correct, building movements that employ all approaches simultaneously.

Centering Solidarity Over Competition

Shifting from competitive to solidarity-based relationships:

- Celebrating others' achievements rather than resenting them
- Sharing resources rather than hoarding
- Amplifying others' voices rather than monopolizing platforms

- Building together rather than competing

Honest Dialogue

Creating brave spaces for difficult conversations about tensions:

- Acknowledging hurt and frustration
- Examining structural forces creating division
- Developing accountability processes
- Committing to repair and relationship-building

Historical Consciousness

Learning and teaching feminist histories:

- Documenting and archiving movement histories
- Teaching younger feminists about the struggles that paved the way
- Older feminists studying contemporary contexts and issues
- Recognizing the ongoing nature of the struggle

Care Across Generations

Practicing mutual care:

- Supporting elders facing health challenges, economic insecurity, and isolation
- Supporting younger activists facing precarity, burnout, violence
- Creating spaces for rest, joy, healing across ages

Addressing Specific Challenges

When Older Feminists Won't Step Back

Some older feminists hold leadership positions long past the point of organizational health. Addressing this requires:

- Clear organizational term limits and transition policies
- Board responsibility for enforcing succession
- Creating emeritus or advisory roles honoring contributions while shifting operational leadership
- Honest conversations about power and legacy

When Younger Feminists Dismiss History

Some younger activists reinvent wheels, dismissing decades of feminist work as irrelevant. Addressing this requires:

- Feminist political education, including movement histories
- Intergenerational dialogue revealing continuities
- Documentation makes past struggles visible
- Older feminists sharing stories accessibly (not lecturing or gatekeeping)

When Communication Breaks Down

Different communication styles can create misunderstandings. Addressing this requires:

- Multiple communication channels (digital and in-person)
- Technology training for those less familiar with digital tools
- In-person relationship-building for those primarily interacting digitally
- Patience and translation across communication norms

RFLD's Intergenerational Approach

RFLD deliberately builds intergenerational feminist movements through:

Leadership Development: Training programs creating pathways for emerging leaders while learning from experienced leaders. Our programs pair young activists with mentors, provide leadership opportunities, and develop networks across generations.

Intergenerational Governance: RFLD's governance structures encompass diverse age groups in leadership, ensuring that multiple generations contribute to shaping the organizational direction.

Feminist Schools: Convening intergenerational learning spaces where feminists of all ages learn together, share experiences, and build relationships.

Resource Sharing: Supporting emerging activists through fiscal sponsorship, capacity building, and access to RFLD's resources and networks.

Documentation: Archiving African feminist histories, conducting oral history projects with older feminists, and ensuring younger activists learn from past struggles.

Collective Care: Creating support systems for feminists of all ages facing burnout, trauma, economic precarity, or health challenges.

Recommendations

To Feminist Organizations:

- Develop and implement succession plans
- Create intergenerational governance structures
- Provide mentorship and reverse mentorship
- Ensure leadership opportunities for emerging activists
- Document organizational histories
- Address power imbalances explicitly

To Donors:

- Fund intergenerational feminist initiatives

- Support emerging feminist activists directly
- Recognize that movements need both institutions and movements
- Provide flexible funding for relationship-building
- Support feminist schools and learning spaces
- Fund documentation and archiving

To Older Feminists:

- Commit to power-sharing and succession
- Mentor emerging leaders generously
- Stay curious about new approaches and issues
- Share histories and analysis accessibly
- Create space for younger voices
- Address ageism (toward both young and old)

To Younger Feminists:

- Learn movement histories
- Honor elders' contributions and sacrifices
- Build relationships across generations
- Seek mentorship and guidance
- Recognize that current possibilities rest on past struggles
- Address ageism (toward both young and old)

To Mid-Generation Feminists:

- Bridge and translate across generations
- Support both older and younger feminists
- Use your positioning to facilitate dialogue
- Challenge ageism from all sides
- Model intergenerational collaboration

Liberation Across Generations

Intergenerational solidarity is not optional—it is essential for movement sustainability, power, and success. We cannot achieve liberation when movements fragment along generational lines. We cannot build sustainable change when each generation starts from scratch, losing hard-won gains and repeating past mistakes.

Our liberation is bound together across generations. The struggles our foremothers fought created possibilities we inherit. The struggles we fight today will shape the futures that younger feminists inherit. We are links in a long chain of resistance stretching back through generations of African women who resisted slavery, colonialism, apartheid, dictatorship, patriarchy—and forward through generations who will continue the struggles we begin but may not complete.

Building intergenerational feminist movements requires a deliberate and sustained commitment from all ages. It means older feminists sharing power, younger feminists honoring history, and everyone resisting systems that benefit from our divisions.

As the South African freedom song declares: "Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo"—Strike the women, you strike the rock. We are the rock—solid, unbreakable, enduring—across all generations.

ARTICLE 12: WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY

From Resolution to Reality

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction

Twenty-five years after the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security—the first resolution explicitly addressing women's experiences in conflict and affirming women's essential role in peace processes—implementation remains woefully inadequate across Africa. While the resolution established groundbreaking frameworks that acknowledge women as agents of peace and security, rather than merely victims of conflict, the gap between policy and practice remains wide.

Across Africa, women constitute the majority of conflict-affected populations yet remain excluded from peace negotiations, transitional justice mechanisms, and post-conflict reconstruction. Sexual violence continues as a weapon of war with systematic impunity. Women peacebuilders work without resources or recognition while militarized masculinity dominates security sectors.

This article examines the realities of conflict in Africa from a feminist perspective, analyzes implementation gaps in the Women, Peace, and Security agenda, documents women's peace activism, and proposes transformative approaches to peace and security that center on women's leadership and challenge militarism.

The Gendered Architecture of Conflict in Africa

Conflict in Africa is profoundly gendered, yet this reality remains systematically overlooked in conventional security analysis. Women and girls experience conflict differently from men and boys, facing gender-specific violence, displacement, and exploitation while simultaneously bearing increased responsibilities as caregivers, providers, and community leaders when men are absent due to death, displacement, or military recruitment.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where conflict has claimed over six million lives since 1996, sexual violence has been weaponized on a scale that defies comprehension. Hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been raped, often with extreme brutality and in front of family members. Armed groups use rape strategically to terrorize communities, destroy social cohesion, and assert control over territory. Dr. Denis Mukwege, the Congolese gynecologist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for treating survivors, describes rape as "cheaper than bullets" for armed groups seeking to dominate populations.

Yet sexual violence represents only one dimension of conflict's gendered impacts. In South Sudan, where civil war has displaced millions since 2013, women constitute 80 percent of the displaced population. They face violence during flight, sexual exploitation in displacement camps, and forced marriage as survival strategies. Women heads of household struggle to access food aid, healthcare, and education for children while navigating protection risks.

In the Lake Chad Basin, where Boko Haram's insurgency has killed over 35,000 people, women face abduction, forced marriage to fighters, sexual slavery, and forced participation in attacks. Girls as young as seven have been used as suicide bombers. Women who escape or are rescued face stigmatization, rejection by families and communities, and lifelong psychological trauma.

In northern Ethiopia's Tigray region, sexual violence during the 2020-2022 conflict was characterized by UN investigators as widespread and systematic, with thousands of women and girls raped by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and militia forces. Survivors report gang rape, sexual slavery, mutilation, and rape with foreign objects as deliberate strategies to terrorize and humiliate Tigrayan communities.

These patterns reveal that sexual violence in conflict is not incidental or the work of "undisciplined" soldiers. It is strategic, systematic, and designed to destroy communities. Yet it occurs within broader patterns of gendered violence that include forced displacement, destruction of livelihoods, denial of humanitarian access, and militarization of entire societies.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War

Sexual violence in African conflicts operates within what feminist scholars call a "continuum of violence"—connected to peacetime violence against women, militarized masculinity, and structural inequalities. Understanding this continuum is essential to developing effective responses.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, research by human rights organizations documents that armed groups use sexual violence strategically to terrorize populations, punish communities perceived as supporting rivals, destroy social cohesion, and assert control over mineral-rich territories. Rape is often public, collective, and accompanied by extreme brutality specifically designed to maximize trauma and humiliation.

Survivors face devastating consequences: physical injuries including fistulas, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and chronic pain; psychological trauma including depression, anxiety, and PTSD; social stigmatization, rejection by husbands and families, and community ostracization; economic impacts as survivors lose livelihoods and face discrimination; and denial of justice as perpetrators remain unpunished.

The response infrastructure is woefully inadequate. Medical care for survivors is scarce, particularly in rural areas where most attacks occur. Surgical repair for fistulas requires specialized facilities unavailable to most survivors. Psychological services are virtually non-existent. Legal services are inaccessible. Safe houses are insufficient. Economic support programs reach only a tiny fraction of survivors.

Most fundamentally, impunity remains nearly absolute. In eastern DRC, where tens of thousands of rapes are documented annually, prosecutions are rare and convictions rarer still. Military courts lack independence. Civilian courts lack capacity. Witnesses face intimidation. Survivors cannot afford legal representation. Police and prosecutors lack training and resources. Sexual violence cases are deprioritized.

This impunity extends to peacekeepers. UN peacekeeping missions in Africa have been plagued by sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers who rape and exploit the populations they are supposed to protect. In the Central African Republic, French peacekeepers sexually abused children in exchange for food. In the

Democratic Republic of Congo, peacekeepers from multiple countries have been implicated in sexual exploitation. Investigations are slow, prosecutions rare, and accountability minimal.

Women's Exclusion from Peace Processes

Despite constituting the majority of conflict-affected populations and playing critical roles in grassroots peacebuilding, women remain systematically excluded from formal peace processes across Africa. This exclusion is not incidental—it reflects deeply gendered assumptions about authority, expertise, and whose voices matter.

Analysis of peace processes in Africa over the past three decades reveals stark patterns. In peace negotiations for conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's participation has been minimal or non-existent. When women are included, they are typically in advisory or observer roles rather than as principal negotiators or signatories.

The consequences are profound. Peace agreements negotiated exclusively by men systematically fail to address issues central to women's security and rights. Gender-based violence provisions are weak or absent. Women's land rights are ignored. Security sector reform does not address militarized masculinity. Transitional justice mechanisms exclude sexual violence. Post-conflict reconstruction reinforces pre-conflict inequalities.

Research demonstrates that peace agreements with meaningful women's participation are more comprehensive and more durable. A study by UN Women found that peace agreements with women signatories are 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years. Women negotiators push for broader definitions of security, stronger provisions on human rights and justice, and more inclusive governance structures.

Yet barriers to women's participation remain formidable. Armed groups and governments resist women's inclusion, arguing peace negotiations are the domain of "those who fought." International mediators prioritize expediency over inclusivity, seeking deals among armed actors rather than legitimate representation. Logistical barriers exclude women: negotiations held in distant capitals without support for travel and childcare; short notice that makes organizing impossible; lack of preparation and briefing for women participants.

Even when women are included, their participation is often tokenistic. They are relegated to observer roles, excluded from backroom negotiations where real decisions are made, given no authority to sign agreements, and silenced when raising gender issues deemed "divisive" or "distracting" from "core" political and military matters.

UN Resolution 1325

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000, was groundbreaking in explicitly recognizing that conflict affects women and men differently and that women must be included in peace and security decision-making. The resolution called for women's equal participation in peace processes, protection of women in conflict, prevention of violence against women, and gender perspectives in all peace and security efforts.

In the two decades since, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda has expanded through additional Security Council resolutions addressing sexual violence in conflict, women's political participation, and accountability. Regional frameworks have been adopted, including the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa.

At the national level, over 100 countries have adopted National Action Plans on Women, Peace, and Security, including numerous African states. These plans outline commitments to implement Resolution 1325 through legislative reform, institutional change, resource allocation, and the establishment of monitoring mechanisms.

Yet implementation remains profoundly inadequate. National Action Plans are often unfunded, unimplemented, and unmonitored. They exist as paper commitments without institutional change or resource allocation. Women remain excluded from peace processes. Sexual violence continues with impunity. Security sectors remain masculine domains resistant to reform.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite having a National Action Plan since 2010, women constituted only 8 percent of participants in the 2016 national dialogue. They were excluded entirely from negotiations between the government and armed groups. In South Sudan, women's groups fought for inclusion in the 2018 peace process but were relegated to observer roles while warlords negotiated power-sharing arrangements. In Somalia, women constitute less than 5 percent of participants in federal peace processes despite decades of women's peace activism.

The fundamental problem is that Resolution 1325 challenges existing power structures—the monopoly of armed actors on peace negotiations, the gendered assumptions about authority and expertise, the prioritization of military over human security. Implementation requires not just technical adjustments but transformative change in how peace and security are understood and pursued.

Women Peacebuilders: Grassroots Activism and Feminist Leadership

While excluded from formal peace processes, African women have been at the forefront of grassroots peacebuilding, community reconciliation, and advocacy for justice and human rights. Their work demonstrates alternative approaches to peace and security grounded in community needs, human rights, and social justice rather than elite power-sharing and military dominance.

In Liberia, women's mass mobilization was instrumental in ending 14 years of civil war. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led by Leymah Gbowee and thousands of ordinary women, organized protests, sit-ins, and ultimately a sex strike demanding peace negotiations. Christian and Muslim women united across religious divides. Market women, displaced persons, and professionals joined forces. When peace talks in Ghana stalled, Liberian women physically blockaded the negotiating room, refusing to let warlords leave until they reached agreement. Their activism helped produce the 2003 peace agreement and elect Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first female president.

In Rwanda, women constitute over 60 percent of the post-genocide population and have driven reconstruction and reconciliation. Women's organizations created community-based reconciliation programs bringing together survivors and perpetrators. Women filled leadership roles in local governance, promoting inclusive

development. Women pushed for constitutional reforms enshrining gender equality and reserving parliamentary seats for women, resulting in the world's highest percentage of women legislators.

In northern Uganda, women's organizations have led efforts to address the legacy of the Lord's Resistance Army conflict, including advocating for formerly abducted women and children, promoting community reconciliation, and challenging traditional justice mechanisms that exclude women. Organizations like the Refugee Law Project and Justice and Reconciliation Project have documented women's experiences, advocated for their inclusion in transitional justice, and supported their leadership in reconstruction.

In Somaliland, women were instrumental in the peace processes that ended civil war and built a functioning democratic state despite international non-recognition. Women organized inter-clan dialogues, mediated disputes, mobilized resources for peace conferences, and advocated for inclusive governance. The Sixth Clan—women's collective representation across clan divisions—became a political force advocating for women's rights and inclusive development.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's organizations operate under extreme danger to document human rights violations, support survivors of sexual violence, advocate for justice, and resist armed groups.

Across the Sahel, women's organizations are addressing radicalization and violent extremism through community dialogue, education, and economic programs. Recognizing that military approaches have failed and often exacerbate violence, these organizations promote alternative strategies centered on addressing root causes including poverty, marginalization, and lack of opportunity.

These examples demonstrate that women peacebuilders bring distinctive approaches to peace and security: holistic understanding of security encompassing physical safety, economic security, health, education, and human rights; emphasis on dialogue, reconciliation, and healing rather than military victory and elite power-sharing; grassroots organizing that mobilizes communities rather than relying on external intervention; persistence and long-term commitment to peace rather than quick fixes; and intersectional analysis addressing connections between gender inequality, poverty, and conflict.

Demilitarization and Feminist Security Frameworks

Feminist approaches to peace and security challenge the dominant paradigm that equates security with military capacity and state sovereignty. They propose alternative frameworks centered on human security, community safety, and social justice.

The conventional security paradigm focuses on state security, military capacity, border protection, and sovereignty. It measures security in terms of military spending, troop numbers, and weapons systems. It assumes that security is achieved through military strength and deterrence. It prioritizes state interests over individual and community well-being.

This paradigm has manifestly failed African populations. Massive military spending coexists with profound insecurity. Arms proliferation fuels rather than prevents conflict. Military responses to insurgency often worsen

violence and humanitarian crises. Security sectors are sources of insecurity for civilians, particularly women who face sexual violence by military and police forces.

Feminist security frameworks propose a fundamental reorientation. Human security rather than state security becomes the priority—ensuring that people can live without fear of violence, hunger, disease, environmental destruction, or rights violations. Security is measured not by military capacity but by people's actual safety and well-being.

Community safety replaces military dominance. Rather than relying on external military intervention or repressive state security forces, communities develop their own safety mechanisms, grounded in social cohesion, conflict resolution, and accountability. Women's leadership in community safety is recognized and resourced.

Structural prevention addresses the root causes of conflict, including poverty, inequality, marginalization, resource conflicts, political exclusion, and human rights violations. Rather than resorting to military responses after violence erupts, investing in development, governance, justice, and human rights can prevent conflict.

Demilitarization reduces the role of military force in societies. Military spending is redirected to social investment. Arms proliferation is reversed through disarmament programs. Security sectors are being reformed to prioritize protection over repression, with civilian oversight and accountability. Police are trained in community policing rather than paramilitary approaches.

Transitional justice is expanded beyond prosecutions to include truth-telling, reparations, institutional reform, and reconciliation. Sexual violence is addressed not as an individual crime but as a systematic violation requiring a comprehensive response, including justice, healing, and structural change.

These approaches are not utopian fantasies but practical alternatives demonstrated by women peacebuilders across Africa. They require political will, resource reallocation, and transformation of power structures—which is precisely why they face such resistance.

Case Studies: Learning from African Women's Peace Activism

Rwanda: Women's Leadership in Post-Genocide Reconstruction

Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of women's political participation in post-conflict contexts. Following the 1994 genocide that killed over 800,000 people, women constituted over 60 percent of the surviving population. This demographic reality, combined with President Paul Kagame's strategic decision to promote women's participation as part of Rwanda's "rebirth," created an unprecedented space for women's political representation.

Rwanda now has the world's highest percentage of women in parliament—61 percent in the lower house. The constitution mandates that women hold at least 30 percent of leadership positions across government. Women lead central ministries and occupy senior positions throughout the state apparatus.

Women's leadership has driven policy changes, including the enactment of progressive laws on gender-based violence, inheritance rights, and land ownership. Rwanda has achieved remarkable development outcomes, including significant poverty reduction, universal health coverage, and high educational enrollment rates.

Yet critical questions remain about the nature and limits of women's participation. Rwanda is an authoritarian state with restricted political space. Women's advancement occurs within constraints on dissent and political opposition. The ruling party controls women's advancement and can withdraw support from those who challenge party positions. Civil society space is restricted. Critical voices face intimidation.

Women's political participation has not fundamentally challenged patriarchal structures or militarized culture. While women hold formal positions, men retain control of key security and economic sectors. Women's advancement is framed as serving national development rather than women's liberation. Feminism is depoliticized and channeled into state-directed women's empowerment programs.

The Rwandan case thus highlights both progress and limitations. Women's political participation can drive necessary reforms even within authoritarian contexts. Yet without broader democratization and autonomous women's movements, women's participation risks becoming instrumentalized for state legitimacy rather than advancing women's liberation.

Liberia: From Activism to Power and Its Contradictions

Liberia's trajectory from women's peace activism to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's presidency demonstrates both possibilities and contradictions of women's political leadership in post-conflict contexts.

The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, mobilizing thousands of women across religious and class divides, was instrumental in ending 14 years of civil war. Their activism contributed to the 2003 peace agreement and generated momentum for increased women's political participation.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, elected president in 2005 and re-elected in 2011, was Africa's first elected female head of state. She appointed women to senior positions, promoted girls' education, and championed women's economic empowerment. Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for their contributions to peace and women's rights.

Yet Johnson Sirleaf's presidency revealed tensions between women's leadership and feminist transformation. She maintained relationships with warlords who committed atrocities during the civil war, including appointing some to government positions. She resisted calls for war crimes prosecutions, prioritizing "reconciliation" that meant impunity. Economic policies favored foreign investment and elite interests over grassroots development. Corruption persisted despite anti-corruption rhetoric.

Women activists who had mobilized for peace found themselves excluded from power or co-opted into government positions that constrained their activism. The mass movement that ended the war did not translate into sustained feminist organizing or structural transformation.

The Liberian case illustrates that women's political leadership, while necessary, does not automatically produce feminist governance or challenge structural inequalities. Women leaders operate within constraints, including

patriarchal institutions, economic pressures, and political compromises. Without autonomous feminist movements maintaining pressure and accountability, women's leadership can reproduce existing power structures.

Democratic Republic of Congo: Activism Under Fire

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, women's organizations operate under conditions of extreme violence and insecurity to support survivors, document violations, and advocate for justice. Their work demonstrates both the courage and limitations of activism in ongoing conflict.

Women human rights defenders face enormous risks. They operate in zones controlled by armed groups. They face threats, intimidation, and attacks for their work. Some have been killed. Many work without adequate security or resources. International funding is unreliable. Government support is minimal or non-existent.

Yet they persist, driven by commitment to survivors and to justice. They have achieved essential victories, including prosecutions of high-ranking military officers for sexual violence, constitutional reforms, and international attention to Congo's crisis.

Their work reveals both what is possible through grassroots activism and what cannot be achieved without broader structural change. Individual services to survivors are essential but insufficient without ending impunity and addressing the root causes of violence. Documentation and advocacy are crucial, but they are limited without a political will for justice and reform. Women's activism is vital but cannot substitute for state responsibility and international action.

From Resolution to Reality: What Must Change

Translating the Women, Peace, and Security agenda from paper commitments to lived reality requires fundamental transformation in how peace and security are understood and pursued.

First, women must be recognized and resourced as key actors in peace and security. This means not just token inclusion in formal processes, but a genuine partnership that acknowledges women's expertise, leadership, and authority. It requires resourcing women's peace organizations, protection for women human rights defenders, and dismantling barriers to women's participation.

Second, sexual violence must be addressed as a systematic violation requiring a comprehensive response. This includes ending impunity through prosecutions, providing comprehensive services to survivors, implementing institutional reforms to address the root causes, and offering reparations to survivors. It requires recognizing connections between wartime sexual violence and peacetime violence against women.

Third, security sectors must be transformed. This includes recruiting and promoting women in military, police, and justice institutions; eliminating violence and discrimination within security sectors; civilian oversight and accountability; and reorienting security sectors toward protection rather than repression.

Fourth, peace processes must be fundamentally reformed. This includes mandatory inclusion of women as negotiators and signatories, not just advisors; participation of women's civil society organizations, not just

individual women; addressing gender-based violence, women's rights, and structural inequalities as core issues, not "side" concerns; and resourcing implementation of gender provisions in peace agreements.

Fifth, demilitarization must replace military dominance. This includes reducing military spending and reallocating resources to social investment; comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs; arms control to reduce weapons proliferation; and challenging militarized masculinity through education and cultural change.

Sixth, transitional justice must center survivors and address structural violence. This includes truth-telling that centers survivors' experiences and analyzes structural causes; prosecutions that address command responsibility and systematic violations; reparations that are comprehensive, survivor-centered, and transformative; institutional reforms that prevent recurrence; and reconciliation grounded in truth, justice, and structural change.

Seventh, post-conflict reconstruction must promote gender equality and social justice. This includes women's participation in all reconstruction decisions; constitutional and legal reforms to advance gender equality; equitable resource distribution including land reform; investment in social services including health and education; and economic programs that benefit women, not just elites.

RFLD's Peace and Security Work

RFLD works across multiple dimensions of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. We support women peace activists and human rights defenders through training, resources, protection, support, and regional networking. We advocate for the inclusion of women in peace processes through engagement with governments, regional organizations, and international actors. We document women's experiences of conflict and their contributions to peacebuilding. We promote accountability for sexual violence through legal support, documentation, and advocacy. We contribute to policy development on Women, Peace, and Security at national, regional, and international levels.

Our work is grounded in recognition that peace requires justice, that security requires rights, and that transformation requires women's leadership. We reject approaches that treat women as victims to be protected rather than agents of change. We challenge militarized approaches to security that perpetuate violence. We promote holistic approaches that address the root causes of conflict, including inequality, marginalization, and structural violence.

Peace, Justice, and Feminist Transformation

Twenty-five years after Resolution 1325, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda remains more aspiration than reality. Women continue to bear the disproportionate burden of conflict while being excluded from peace processes. Sexual violence continues with impunity. Military approaches continue to dominate, despite their manifest failure.

Yet African women continue to organize for peace, justice, and transformation. They document violations, support survivors, mediate conflicts, advocate for justice, and build alternatives. Their work demonstrates that

different approaches are possible—approaches centered on human security, community safety, and social justice rather than military dominance and elite power-sharing.

Realizing the promise of Resolution 1325 requires more than the implementation of existing frameworks. It requires a fundamental transformation in how peace and security are understood and pursued. It requires challenging military dominance and embracing demilitarization. It requires centering human security and rights over state sovereignty. It requires recognizing women's expertise and leadership rather than treating women as afterthoughts or victims.

Most fundamentally, it requires recognizing that peace and justice are inseparable. Peace without justice is impunity. Security without rights is repression. Reconstruction without equality reproduces inequality. Feminist approaches to peace and security emphasize the need to address all dimensions simultaneously—ending violence, achieving justice, promoting rights, ensuring equality, and transforming structures.

African women peacebuilders point the way forward. The question is whether those with power will follow their leadership toward peace, justice, and transformation. The world promised African women a place at the peace table. It is long past time to deliver on that promise—not as charity or inclusion but as recognition that peace is impossible without women's full participation and feminist transformation of security.

ARTICLE 13: LEGAL WARFARE

Strategic Litigation for Women's Rights

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction

Courts have become critical battlegrounds for African women's rights. Strategic litigation—carefully selected test cases designed to establish legal precedents, challenge discriminatory laws, and advance rights—has achieved remarkable victories, including decriminalizing abortion, striking down discriminatory marriage laws, establishing equal inheritance rights, and recognizing gender-based violence as human rights violations.

Yet legal victories alone do not guarantee justice. Laws exist on paper while violations continue in practice. Court judgments remain unimplemented. Legal systems remain inaccessible to most women in Africa. Conservative judges interpret laws restrictively. Backlash against women's rights gains intensifies.

This article examines strategic litigation as a feminist strategy in Africa, analyzes landmark cases and their impacts, explores the tensions between legal and grassroots organizing, documents barriers to access to justice, and proposes comprehensive approaches to legal change that combine litigation with movement-building, policy advocacy, and cultural transformation.

The Role of Law in Women's Liberation: Possibilities and Limitations

Law occupies a contradictory position in struggles for women's rights. It can be a tool for liberation or an instrument of oppression. Understanding this duality is essential for effective feminist legal strategy.

On one hand, the law provides frameworks for challenging discrimination, establishing rights, holding violators accountable, and protecting vulnerable populations. Legal victories can change individual lives, establish precedents that benefit millions, shift public discourse, and create momentum for broader social change. Constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality, laws criminalizing violence against women, and court judgments affirming rights provide tools that women can use to claim justice.

On the other hand, law reflects and reinforces existing power structures. Legal systems were historically designed by and for elite men. Patriarchal assumptions shape judicial interpretation. Access to justice is stratified by class, education, geography, and power. Legal processes are expensive, time-consuming, and traumatizing. Court victories do not automatically translate into change on the ground.

Feminist legal scholars distinguish between formal equality and substantive equality. Formal equality means identical treatment regardless of gender—laws that appear neutral on their face. Substantive equality recognizes that similar treatment of people in unequal positions perpetuates inequality. It requires addressing structural barriers, historical discrimination, and social context.

For example, a law giving wives and husbands equal inheritance rights appears to provide formal equality. However, if women lack access to education, economic resources, legal knowledge, and social power to claim those rights, formal equality holds little meaning. Substantive equality requires not only neutral laws but also active measures to address barriers—such as legal aid, education, enforcement mechanisms, and the transformation of discriminatory social norms.

African feminists have developed sophisticated understandings of law's contradictory role. They use legal tools strategically while remaining skeptical of legal formalism. They pursue litigation while organizing for broader social change. They celebrate legal victories while recognizing their limitations. They work within legal systems while calling for fundamental transformation.

This approach rejects both uncritical faith in law and cynical dismissal of legal strategies. Instead, it recognizes law as one tool among many—powerful but limited, necessary but insufficient.

Landmark Litigation Victories: Transforming Rights on Paper

African women's rights litigation has achieved remarkable victories over the past three decades, establishing precedents and changing laws across the continent.

Constitutional Gender Equality Provisions

Many African constitutions adopted or revised since the 1990s include strong provisions for gender equality, often secured through women's advocacy during the constitution-making processes. South Africa's 1996 constitution contains extensive equality provisions that prohibit discrimination based on sex, gender, marital status, and pregnancy, and require the state to promote equality through legislative and other measures. Kenya's 2010 constitution includes similar provisions, as well as requirements for women's representation in elected and appointed bodies. Rwanda's 2003 constitution mandates that women hold at least 30 percent of positions in decision-making organs.

These provisions provide constitutional foundations for challenging discriminatory laws and practices. They shift the burden of proof to those defending the practice of discrimination. They enable courts to strike down laws that violate equality. They create frameworks for affirmative action.

Yet constitutional provisions alone do not guarantee equality. Implementation requires enabling legislation, enforcement mechanisms, judicial interpretation, and social change. Some constitutions include equality provisions alongside discriminatory laws in personal status, inheritance, and land rights. Courts sometimes interpret equality provisions narrowly or refuse to apply them to "cultural" or "religious" matters.

Decriminalizing Abortion and Establishing Reproductive Rights

Abortion remains criminalized or severely restricted across most of Africa, forcing millions of women to seek unsafe procedures that kill thousands annually. Yet litigation has begun to challenge these laws and establish reproductive rights.

In 2019, Kenya's High Court heard arguments in a case challenging provisions of the penal code criminalizing abortion. While the court ultimately upheld the law's constitutionality, it issued important dicta recognizing women's rights to health, dignity, and reproductive autonomy, and calling on parliament to develop guidelines for legal abortion as permitted under Kenya's constitution.

In Malawi, the Constitutional Court is hearing a challenge to penal code provisions criminalizing abortion, brought by women's rights organizations arguing that criminalization violates constitutional rights to health, dignity, and equality. The case has sparked a vigorous public debate about reproductive rights.

In Benin, constitutional reforms in 2018 expanded grounds for legal abortion beyond the previous narrow exception for rape and danger to life. While advocacy groups pushed for complete decriminalization, the reforms represent significant progress achieved through sustained advocacy combining litigation, legislative engagement, and public education.

These cases demonstrate both possibilities and limitations of abortion litigation. Courts can establish important principles about reproductive autonomy even when upholding criminal laws. Litigation creates platforms for public education and movement building. Yet achieving legal abortion access requires not just favorable court judgments but legislative reform, implementation of services, and transformation of social attitudes.

Challenging Discriminatory Marriage Laws

Marriage laws across Africa historically treated women as minors requiring male guardianship, denied women property rights within marriage, and privileged men in divorce and custody. Strategic litigation has challenged these provisions with significant victories.

In Zimbabwe, the landmark case *Magaya v. Magaya* (1999) initially upheld customary law, which denied women inheritance rights, ruling that a daughter could not inherit her father's estate because, under customary law, only males are entitled to inherit. The decision sparked massive protests by women's organizations. Subsequently, constitutional reforms and new legislation established equal inheritance rights. Later court decisions reversed *Magaya*, establishing gender equality in inheritance under both statutory and customary law.

The case demonstrates both the potential for litigation to catalyze broader change and the danger of adverse precedents. The initial judgment entrenched discrimination, but women's mobilization transformed it into momentum for reform.

In Kenya, the *Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) v. Attorney General* case challenged provisions of the Marriage Act that allowed men to marry under multiple legal systems simultaneously (including customary, Islamic, civil, and Hindu marriage). In contrast, women could only marry under one system. The court struck down the provisions as discriminatory, holding that they subordinated women and violated constitutional equality guarantees.

In Botswana, the landmark case *Ramantele v. Mmusi* (2013) held that a customary law rule designating the youngest son rather than the eldest child as heir to family property violated constitutional equality provisions.

The court held that custom must conform to constitutional rights, establishing important precedent for challenging discriminatory customary practices.

These cases establish critical principles: customary law must conform to the principle of constitutional equality; women and men have equal rights to inheritance and property; and discrimination based on sex violates constitutional guarantees. Yet implementation remains contested. Families and communities resist change. Women lack information about their rights. Courts in rural areas apply discriminatory customs despite legal reforms.

Recognizing Gender-Based Violence as a Human Rights Violation

For decades, violence against women was treated as a private matter beyond state responsibility. Strategic litigation has challenged this view, establishing that states have obligations to prevent, investigate, prosecute, and provide remedies for gender-based violence.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights issued groundbreaking decisions establishing state responsibility for gender-based violence. In *COHRE v. Sudan* (2009), the Commission held that mass rape of women in Darfur violated multiple Charter provisions and that Sudan failed its obligations by not preventing, investigating, or prosecuting violations.

In *OMCT and SOS Esclaves v. Mauritania* (2020), the Commission held that slavery disproportionately affecting women and involving sexual violence violated Mauritania's obligations, and required comprehensive measures including prosecutions, reparations, and institutional reforms.

At the national level, litigation has challenged police inaction on domestic violence, inadequate prosecutions of sexual violence, and discriminatory legal provisions. In South Africa, the *Carmichele v. Minister of Safety and Security* case held that police failure to act on domestic violence complaints violated constitutional rights and created state liability. The judgment catalyzed reforms including better police training and specialized domestic violence courts.

In Kenya, litigation challenged penal code provisions defining rape narrowly and setting minimal sentences. Reforms expanded the definition, increased penalties, and addressed procedural barriers that discouraged reporting and prosecution.

These victories establish important principles but face implementation challenges. Police continue to dismiss domestic violence reports. Prosecutors deprioritize sexual violence cases. Courts apply victim-blaming assumptions. Survivors lack access to legal services. Social stigma discourages reporting.

Regional Mechanisms: African Court and African Commission

The African human rights system offers crucial platforms for strategic litigation that advances women's rights. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights offer remedies when national systems fail.

The African Commission hears communications (complaints) alleging Charter violations by states that have ratified the African Charter. The Commission issues decisions that find violations and recommend remedies. While not legally binding like court judgments, Commission decisions carry moral authority and create political pressure.

Women's rights organizations have used the Commission strategically. *IHRDA and OSI v. DRC* (2016) addressed mass rape in Songo Mboyo, finding that DRC violated Charter provisions by failing to prevent, investigate, and prosecute sexual violence by soldiers. The decision recommended prosecutions, reparations, and institutional reforms.

Equality Now and ESCR v. Ethiopia challenged early marriage practices violating girls' rights. The Commission identified violations and recommended reforms to the law, awareness programs, and protective mechanisms.

Centre for Human Rights v. Burundi addressed police violence against women protesters, finding violations of rights to freedom from violence, dignity, and peaceful assembly.

These decisions establish important precedents even when implementation is limited. They provide authoritative interpretations of Charter provisions. They create pressure on governments. They support national advocacy by providing international validation.

The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights has jurisdiction to issue legally binding judgments on Charter violations. However, only a minority of African states have accepted the Court's jurisdiction, and some that initially accepted have subsequently withdrawn.

Women's rights cases before the Court include challenges to discriminatory nationality laws, violence against women, and harmful practices. In *Yogogombaye v. Senegal*, though dismissed on procedural grounds, the case raised important issues about violence against women and state responsibility.

The African Court's potential remains largely unrealized due to limited state acceptance of jurisdiction and insufficient resources. Yet it represents an important avenue for future litigation as more states accept jurisdiction and civil society develops capacity to bring cases.

National Constitutional Litigation: Using Bills of Rights

National constitutional litigation has been central to advancing women's rights across Africa, particularly in countries with strong bills of rights and progressive constitutional courts.

South Africa's Constitutional Court has issued landmark judgments on gender equality, reproductive rights, violence against women, and LGBTQI+ rights. The Court has held that discrimination based on gender, sex, pregnancy, and sexual orientation violates constitutional equality provisions. It has required government action to address gender-based violence. It has struck down laws criminalizing sex work as violating sex workers' rights.

Kenya's constitutional litigation has challenged discriminatory laws on marriage, citizenship, and property. The High Court and Court of Appeal have issued progressive judgments establishing gender equality in inheritance,

marriage, and citizenship. However, implementation remains contested and some judgments have been reversed or limited by higher courts.

Uganda's constitutional litigation on women's rights has had mixed results. Courts have issued some progressive judgments on property rights and domestic violence, but have upheld discriminatory laws on adultery and rejected challenges to restrictions on women's freedoms.

Nigeria's constitutional litigation faces challenges from legal pluralism—multiple legal systems including statutory, customary, and Sharia law operating simultaneously with unclear hierarchy and jurisdiction. Courts have struggled to reconcile constitutional equality provisions with customary and religious laws that treat women differently.

These national experiences demonstrate several patterns. Constitutional courts can be powerful allies for women's rights when they have independence, progressive judges, and strong equality provisions. Litigation works best when combined with broader advocacy creating political and social pressure. Adverse judgments can entrench discrimination and require sustained mobilization to overcome. Legal victories require enforcement mechanisms and social change to become meaningful.

Feminist Legal Theory and Practice in African Contexts

African feminist lawyers and scholars have developed distinctive approaches to using law for women's rights, grounded in African social contexts and informed by feminist analysis of law's role in liberation struggles.

Intersectional analysis recognizes that women experience multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexuality, and other factors. Legal strategies must address these intersections rather than treating gender as isolated from other identities and power relations.

For example, litigation on land rights must address how gender intersects with customary systems, class position, marital status, and ethnicity to shape women's access. A wealthy urban professional woman faces different barriers than a poor rural woman, though both may experience gender discrimination.

Contextual approaches reject universal prescriptions in favor of strategies tailored to specific social, cultural, political, and legal contexts. What works in South Africa's relatively progressive constitutional system may not work in authoritarian contexts with limited judicial independence. Approaches effective in Anglophone legal systems differ from those in Francophone or mixed systems.

Pluralistic engagement recognizes multiple legal systems operating simultaneously in many African countries—statutory, customary, religious, and international law. Rather than viewing pluralism only as obstacle, feminist lawyers engage strategically with different systems, using favorable aspects while challenging discriminatory elements.

For example, some customary systems include gender-egalitarian elements that can be used to challenge patriarchal practices. Some religious interpretations support women's rights even as others restrict them. International human rights law provides tools for challenging national discrimination.

Movement lawyering rejects traditional lawyer-client hierarchies in favor of partnership between lawyers and social movements. Lawyers support movement goals rather than imposing legal agendas. Communities affected by litigation participate in strategy decisions. Legal work connects to broader organizing.

This approach recognizes that lawyers' technical expertise is valuable but insufficient. Communities possess knowledge of social realities, power dynamics, and strategic opportunities that lawyers lack. Effective feminist legal strategy emerges from dialogue and partnership.

Popular legal education makes legal knowledge accessible to communities, enabling people to know and claim their rights. Paralegals, community trainers, and popular education materials translate complex legal provisions into understandable information. Education programs use participatory methods encouraging dialogue and critical analysis.

Popular legal education challenges expert monopoly on legal knowledge. It recognizes that law belongs to people, not just lawyers. It builds capacity for collective action rather than individual legal services.

Transformative remedies go beyond individual compensation to address structural violations and prevent recurrence. They seek not just damages but institutional reforms, policy changes, and social transformation.

For example, litigation on sexual violence might seek not just compensation for individual survivors but also police training, specialized prosecution units, funding for survivor services, and public education campaigns. Remedies address root causes rather than individual symptoms.

Limitations of Legal Strategies: When Law Is Not Enough

While celebrating legal victories, African feminists remain clear-eyed about law's limitations as tool for transformation.

Access barriers mean most African women cannot access legal systems. Legal services are expensive and concentrated in urban areas. Court procedures are complex and intimidating. Women lack information about rights and how to claim them. Language barriers exclude those who do not speak official languages. Corruption disadvantages those without resources or connections.

Even when women access courts, they face gender bias from judges, lawyers, prosecutors, and police. Victim-blaming in sexual violence cases. Assumptions that women provoked violence or fabricate allegations. Dismissal of domestic violence as "family matters." Stereotypes about women's credibility, sexuality, and proper behavior.

Implementation gaps mean legal victories do not automatically change reality. Favorable judgments are ignored. Parliament refuses to enact enabling legislation. Executive agencies lack resources or will to implement. Local officials continue discriminatory practices. Social norms resist legal change.

For example, Kenya's constitution guarantees equal inheritance rights, but customary practices denying women inheritance continue in many communities. Laws criminalizing female genital cutting exist across Africa, but practices continue due to social pressure and lack of enforcement.

Backlash against women's rights gains has intensified as legal victories accumulate. Conservative religious and political forces mobilize to resist or reverse gains. They pressure judges, legislators, and executives. They promote restrictive interpretations of existing laws. They mobilize against women's rights advocates.

In several African countries, efforts to pass comprehensive gender equality laws have faced fierce opposition from religious conservatives who portray the laws as "Western" impositions threatening "African values." This rhetoric has blocked or weakened legislation despite strong advocacy.

Legal formalism can depoliticize women's rights by treating structural inequality as technical legal problems requiring expert solutions. This obscures power dimensions and discourages collective action. It channels energy into litigation rather than organizing. It promotes reliance on lawyers and courts rather than collective power.

Co-optation occurs when legal strategies are embraced by institutions resistant to substantive change. They celebrate formal equality while maintaining structural inequality. They fund legal services while opposing systemic reform. They appoint token women to visible positions while resisting transformation.

These limitations do not invalidate legal strategies but require understanding law as one tool among many, necessary but insufficient for liberation.

Access to Justice: Barriers and Alternatives

The vast majority of African women cannot access formal justice systems. Understanding and addressing barriers is essential for meaningful justice access.

Economic barriers are fundamental. Legal services are expensive. Poor women cannot afford lawyers. Even free legal aid programs have limited capacity. Indirect costs—transportation, accommodation, childcare, lost income—make accessing courts impossible for many women.

Geographic barriers mean courts are distant from rural areas where most Africans live. Women must travel to urban centers to access justice—requiring time and resources they lack. Mobile courts and circuit courts reach some areas but remain infrequent.

Information barriers mean women lack knowledge about rights, laws, and procedures. Legal information is in official languages, not local languages. It uses technical terminology. Women with limited education struggle to understand legal processes.

Social barriers discourage women from seeking justice. Family and community pressure to remain silent about abuse. Stigma attached to women who "air dirty laundry" in court. Fear of retaliation from abusers. Shame about sexual violence.

Institutional barriers within justice systems compound other obstacles. Police dismiss women's complaints. Prosecutors decline to file charges. Courts delay hearings. Judges apply discriminatory assumptions. Procedures re-traumatize survivors.

Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive approaches combining institutional reform and alternative mechanisms.

Paralegal programs train community members to provide basic legal information, support, and mediation. Paralegals are accessible and affordable. They speak local languages and understand community contexts. They can address many issues without formal court processes.

Organizations across Africa train paralegals—often women—who work in their communities educating people about rights, helping resolve disputes, supporting abuse survivors, accompanying women to police and courts, and referring complex cases to lawyers.

Paralegals serve as bridges between communities and formal justice systems. They demystify law and make rights meaningful. They enable communities to resolve many disputes without expensive formal processes. They identify cases requiring lawyers and courts.

Community legal education makes legal knowledge accessible through participatory programs using local languages, visual materials, drama, and discussion. Rather than lawyers lecturing, facilitators engage communities in dialogue about rights, laws, and social change.

Education programs address specific issues—domestic violence, inheritance, land rights—and broader questions about justice, power, and transformation. They build critical consciousness about structural inequality while providing practical information about claiming rights.

Alternative dispute resolution through community mediation and customary processes can provide accessible justice for some disputes. Mediation is faster, cheaper, and less adversarial than court processes. It can produce solutions tailored to community contexts.

However, alternative processes can also perpetuate inequality if not carefully structured. Traditional mediation may pressure women to accept inadequate settlements. Male elders may dominate processes. Women's voices may be silenced.

Feminist approaches to alternative dispute resolution ensure women's participation, provide legal information about rights, maintain connection to formal systems for serious violations, and monitor outcomes for fairness.

Specialized institutions can improve justice access for specific violations. Family courts, domestic violence courts, and sexual violence courts provide specialized procedures, trained personnel, and support services. They can process cases faster and with greater sensitivity than general courts.

However, specialized courts require adequate resources, trained personnel, and monitoring. Without these elements, they become additional bureaucracy without improving outcomes.

Legal aid provides free or low-cost legal services to people who cannot afford lawyers. In many African countries, legal aid is provided by government legal aid offices, NGOs, law schools, and pro bono lawyer programs.

Demand far exceeds capacity. Legal aid programs lack resources to assist more than a small fraction of people who need services. They typically prioritize criminal cases over civil matters like family law. Rural areas are underserved.

Comprehensive legal aid requires substantial investment in qualified lawyers, support staff, offices in accessible locations, and outreach to inform people about services.

Balancing Litigation and Organizing: Strategic Questions

Feminist legal practice navigates tensions between litigation and broader organizing. Strategic questions help guide decisions about when and how to use legal strategies.

When is litigation appropriate? Not every rights violation warrants litigation. Strategic litigation should serve broader movement goals. Questions to consider include: Will litigation establish important precedents? Does it address structural rather than only individual violations? Will it catalyze broader organizing? Can affected communities participate meaningfully? Are resources available for long processes? What are risks of adverse judgments?

Who controls legal strategy? Traditional lawyer-client relationships give lawyers decision-making authority. Feminist approaches share control with affected communities. Communities participate in deciding whether to litigate, what arguments to make, and what outcomes to seek. Lawyers provide legal expertise while communities contribute knowledge of social realities and movement goals.

How does litigation relate to organizing? Litigation works best when connected to broader organizing. Court cases create platforms for public education, media attention, and movement building. Organizing creates pressure on courts, legislature, and executive. Legal victories become meaningful when movements build power to enforce them.

What happens after legal victories? Winning cases is only the beginning. Implementation requires monitoring, advocacy, enforcement actions, public education, and continued organizing. Movements must maintain pressure to ensure judgments are not ignored.

How to address legal setbacks? Adverse judgments do not end struggles. They can catalyze organizing as outrage about unjust decisions mobilizes people. They reveal need for legislative or constitutional reform. They demonstrate why broader social change is necessary.

Case Studies from Multiple African Countries

South Africa: Constitutional Litigation and Structural Change

South Africa's transition from apartheid included adoption of one of the world's most progressive constitutions, with extensive equality provisions and socio-economic rights. The Constitutional Court has issued landmark judgments on women's rights, including cases addressing domestic violence, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, and customary law discrimination.

The *Carmichele* case held that police failure to protect women from violence violated constitutional rights. *Christian Education South Africa* established that religious and cultural practices must conform to constitutional rights. *Bhe v. Magistrate, Khayelitsha* struck down customary law provisions excluding women from inheritance.

These victories establish important precedents and validate women's rights. Yet South Africa continues to have among the world's highest rates of violence against women. Economic inequality affects women disproportionately. Implementation of court judgments often lags.

The South African experience demonstrates both constitutional litigation's power and its limitations. Progressive jurisprudence is vital but insufficient without addressing structural violence, economic inequality, and social norms.

Kenya: Constitutional Reform and Implementation Struggles

Kenya's 2010 constitution included extensive gender equality provisions secured through women's advocacy during the constitutional process. The constitution guarantees equality, prohibits discrimination, requires women's representation, and includes socio-economic rights.

Litigation has challenged discriminatory laws on citizenship, inheritance, and marriage. Courts have issued progressive judgments establishing equal rights. However, implementation remains contested. Some judgments have been reversed or limited. Parliament has been slow to enact implementing legislation. Patriarchal norms resist legal change.

The Kenyan experience highlights importance of constitutional frameworks while demonstrating that constitutions alone do not guarantee equality. Sustained advocacy, legislative reform, judicial interpretation, and social change are necessary to realize constitutional promises.

Zimbabwe: Mobilizing Around Legal Setbacks

Zimbabwe's legal struggles illustrate how adverse judgments can catalyze movement building. The 1999 *Magaya* decision upholding customary law discrimination against women sparked massive protest. Women's organizations mobilized across differences to challenge the decision. Their advocacy contributed to constitutional reforms and legislative changes establishing equal inheritance rights.

Subsequent cases reversed *Magaya*, establishing gender equality. The mobilization strengthened women's organizations and built momentum for broader reforms including constitutional provisions reserving parliamentary seats for women.

The Zimbabwean experience demonstrates that legal setbacks need not be final. Organized resistance can transform defeats into momentum for change.

Multiple Countries: Domestic Violence Legislation

Many African countries have enacted domestic violence laws following sustained advocacy by women's organizations. These laws criminalize domestic violence, provide protection orders, establish specialized courts, and require police and courts to take violence seriously.

Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, and numerous other countries now have laws addressing domestic violence. These represent critical legal victories secured through years of advocacy.

Yet implementation remains inconsistent. Police continue to treat domestic violence as "family matters" requiring private resolution. Victims face barriers to accessing protection. Courts apply victim-blaming assumptions. Many women are unaware that laws exist.

These experiences demonstrate that passing laws is only the first step. Implementation requires enforcement mechanisms, institutional training, adequate resources, public education, and continued advocacy.

Policy Recommendations: From Legal Victories to Justice

Translating legal victories into lived justice requires comprehensive approaches that address access barriers, implementation gaps, and structural inequalities.

Expand legal aid through substantial investment in government legal aid programs, support for NGO legal services, clinical legal education programs at law schools, and requirements for pro bono service by lawyers. Legal aid must be available for civil cases, including family law, as well as for criminal cases. Rural areas require mobile legal aid and paralegals.

Invest in paralegal programs that provide accessible legal information and support. Train community members, particularly women, as paralegals and resource them through paralegal organizations. Develop systems connecting paralegals to lawyers for complex cases. Develop regulatory frameworks that recognize the roles of paralegals.

Reform legal procedures to reduce barriers. Simplify processes. Use local languages. Provide childcare at courts. Expedite hearings. Eliminate unnecessary costs. Use technology for remote participation where appropriate. Ensure women's safety in court facilities.

Train justice sector actors including judges, prosecutors, police, and court staff on gender equality, gender-based violence, and human rights. Address patriarchal assumptions and victim-blaming. Develop specialized knowledge on issues affecting women. Include women's rights organizations in training design and delivery.

Establish specialized institutions including family courts, domestic violence courts, and sexual violence courts with trained personnel, specialized procedures, and support services. Ensure adequate resources and monitoring. Evaluate effectiveness and address problems.

Strengthen enforcement mechanisms for court judgments. Create dedicated implementation units. Provide contempt proceedings for non-compliance. Enable civil society monitoring. Require periodic reporting on implementation. Impose consequences for non-compliance.

Support strategic litigation by resourcing women's rights organizations conducting test cases. Provide litigation funds. Build litigation capacity. Support impact litigation addressing structural violations. Ensure affected communities participate meaningfully.

Reform discriminatory laws through comprehensive legal reform processes engaging women's organizations and affected communities. Address laws on marriage, inheritance, land, violence, employment, and political participation. Harmonize statutory, customary, and religious laws with constitutional equality provisions.

Promote legal literacy through public education campaigns using multiple media—radio, television, social media, community meetings, popular theater. Translate legal information into local languages. Make information accessible to people with limited education. Engage men as allies in promoting women's rights.

Address social norms that perpetuate discrimination through community dialogue, education, media campaigns, and cultural activities. Engage traditional and religious leaders. Promote positive role models. Challenge victim-blaming and gender stereotypes. Recognize that legal change requires social change.

RFLD's Legal Support Work

RFLD supports women's legal rights through multiple strategies. We provide direct legal assistance through a partnership with lawyers and paralegals, supporting women accessing justice in cases involving violence, property rights, and discrimination. We conduct strategic litigation on issues with the potential to establish precedents and advance rights, including cases before national courts and regional mechanisms.

We strengthen legal capacity through training programs for lawyers, paralegals, women's rights advocates, and community members on women's rights, gender equality, and effective legal strategies. We develop legal resources, including simplified guides to laws, rights education materials, and documentation of legal precedents.

We engage in policy advocacy for legal reforms that address discrimination and advance rights, working closely with parliamentarians, government officials, and regional bodies. We support women's participation in constitutional and legislative processes.

We build movements by connecting legal work to broader organizing, ensuring that litigation serves the movement's goals and that movements build power to enforce their legal victories. We recognize law as one tool among many for transformation.

Law as Tool and Terrain of Struggle

Law is both a tool for liberation and a terrain of struggle. African women have utilized the law strategically to challenge discrimination, establish their rights, hold violators accountable, and transform institutions. Strategic litigation has achieved remarkable victories.

Yet law alone cannot liberate. Legal victories require social movements to enforce them. Courts can establish rights but cannot guarantee justice. Formal equality does not produce substantive equality. Progressive jurisprudence coexists with persistent discrimination.

Feminist legal practice recognizes these contradictions. It uses law strategically while remaining skeptical of legal formalism. It celebrates victories while acknowledging limitations. It centers on affected communities rather than legal experts. It connects litigation to organizing. It pursues institutional reform while building power for transformation.

The future of African women's rights litigation lies not in choosing between legal strategies and social mobilization but in combining them synergistically. Legal victories create space for organizing. Organizing builds power to enforce legal gains. Movement-based litigation challenges structures rather than only individual violations. Feminist lawyers partner with communities rather than imposing expert solutions.

As African women continue to use the law as a tool for liberation, they demonstrate that justice requires more than courtrooms. It requires movements. It requires power. It involves the transformation of structures, not just laws. Legal warfare is essential—but it is only one front in broader struggles for liberation, equality, and justice.

ARTICLE 14: DECOLONIZING AID

Reimagining International Solidarity

By the RFLD Research and Documentation Team

Introduction

International aid to Africa is deeply flawed. Despite hundreds of billions of dollars from wealthy nations and foundations over many years, African women's movements remain underfunded, grassroots groups struggle to survive, and control over resources and decisions stays concentrated in the Global North. The aid system was founded on colonial bases and continues to foster relationships of domination and dependence, even as it claims to promote development and empowerment.

This flawed system is no accident. It results from deliberate choices about who holds power, whose knowledge is valued, which priorities are emphasized, and how change occurs. Northern donors control resources, set agendas, define what is legitimate work, enforce reporting standards, and assess "success" through their frameworks. African organizations—despite led by talented strategists and community experts—must cater to Northern audiences, adopt Northern methods, report in Northern languages, and measure impact using Northern metrics.

The outcome is predictable: African women's organizations spend more time writing grant proposals than engaging communities, more effort meeting donor criteria than addressing grassroots needs, and more capacity translating local insights into donor language than building local leadership. Power flows upward to donors, while accountability moves downward to "beneficiaries." Northern organizations become wealthy as intermediaries, while Southern groups remain dependent. Innovation is stifled as groups imitate donor-approved models instead of exploring local solutions.

However, this system is not inevitable. Aid could be transformed significantly. Resources could be allocated based on trust rather than control, solidarity rather than charity, partnership rather than paternalism. Decision-making could reside with those closest to the issues rather than those far removed. Accountability could be directed toward communities rather than donors. This article examines how aid sustains colonial dynamics, its effects on African women's movements, and suggests alternatives rooted in genuine solidarity and decolonization.

Colonial Foundations: How Aid Reproduces Empire

To understand the issues with contemporary aid, it's essential to examine its colonial origins. After World War II, international development aid increased as European empires declined and newly independent nations sought resources for rebuilding. This aid system was intentionally designed to uphold Western influence and prevent these nations from adopting socialist paths during the Cold War.

President Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural speech explained the core idea: "underdeveloped" countries needed Western technical help and investment to "modernize" and "develop." This view positioned the West as advanced and the Global South as backward, with Western knowledge seen as universal and scientific, while Southern knowledge was viewed as traditional and inferior. Western capitalism was seen as the only route to prosperity, and Western aid as benevolent support rather than reparation for centuries of exploitation.

From the start, colonial ideas influenced aid. The aim was to "civilize" and "modernize" recipient nations, echoing colonial claims. Western experts designed programs for passive recipients, and success was measured by their adoption of Western institutions, practices, and values. Even after colonialism ended, aid was used to preserve Western economic and political dominance.

These patterns continue today, despite language changes. "Development" replaced "civilization" but still carried assumptions of Western superiority. "Capacity building" implies that recipients lack capacity, overlooking how colonialism has destroyed local institutions and knowledge. "Technical assistance" positions Western experts as holders of knowledge, with Africans as recipients. "Accountability" now means upward reporting to donors, not downward to communities.

The Aid Industrial Complex: Who Benefits?

Examining the actual allocation of aid money reveals that the aid industry primarily benefits Northern institutions and consultants, rather than communities and organizations in the Global South. Research from organizations such as Global Financial Integrity suggests that most official development assistance (ODA) fails to reach its intended recipients. Instead, the funds stay in donor countries, funding consultants, technical support, administrative costs, and tied aid, which forces recipients to buy goods and services from donor nations. When money does arrive in recipient countries, it typically flows to Northern NGOs working on projects or to Southern elites who are well-connected but often disconnected from grassroots communities. A 2020 study revealed that less than 1% of international aid reaches grassroots women's organizations in the Global South, despite claims of supporting women's empowerment. AWID’s research shows that women's organizations receive only 0.003% of ODA and just 0.4% of aid aimed at gender equality. African feminist groups receive even less, with a tiny share of funding allocated to women's rights globally.

Meanwhile, contractors and consultants from the North gain substantial profits. Some individual consultants charge daily rates that are higher than the monthly incomes of most Africans. Consulting firms secure multi-million-dollar contracts to design and assess programs that local African organizations can develop more efficiently and at a lower cost. Northern NGOs with costly headquarters and high staff salaries often implement programs that local groups could deliver more effectively and at a lower price.

This extractive system creates distorted incentives. Northern organizations tend to support the existing system that employs them, rather than transferring power and resources to their Southern partners. Consultants are motivated to identify problems needing their expertise rather than acknowledging local capacities. Donors prefer funding large, established organizations, where funds are quickly spent and reporting is straightforward, over smaller, innovative grassroots groups.

Consequently, the aid sector sustains itself rather than driving genuine change. The persistence of poverty often hinders job opportunities, conference participation, publications, and career advancement. The industry professionalizes activism, transforming grassroots movements into NGO sectors that depend on external funding. It fosters competition rather than collaboration, as organizations compete for limited resources. It favors grant writing over organizing, reporting over tangible results, and donor appeasement over community benefit accountability.

What Decolonized Aid Would Look Like

Decolonizing aid involves fundamentally reimagining relationships between the Global North and South, redistributing power and resources, and prioritizing Southern leadership, knowledge, and priorities. Trust-based philanthropy offers flexible, long-term, unrestricted funding based on trust in organizations' expertise and judgment, rather than on detailed project plans and extensive reports. Organizations decide how to use these resources based on their understanding of needs and strategies. Reporting emphasizes learning and adaptation over compliance, and evaluation involves organizations as partners in defining success, rather than extracting data for donors. Several foundations are experimenting with trust-based approaches by providing multi-year, unrestricted grants, streamlining applications and reporting processes, seeking feedback from grantees, offering support beyond funding, and committing to equity and power-sharing. Early results suggest trust-based funding outperforms traditional methods, allowing organizations to invest in infrastructure, respond flexibly to changes, take calculated risks, and focus more on their work than on fundraising and reporting.

Reparative funding acknowledges the historical and ongoing extraction from the Global South by the Global North and offers resources as reparations, rather than charity. It shifts the framing of aid from voluntary generosity to an obligation rooted in colonialism, slavery, and ongoing exploitation. This approach recognizes that the wealth of the Global North was built on the extraction of the Global South and that it continues to benefit from unjust economic systems.

Reparative strategies would allocate funding based on historical harm and current needs, rather than donor priorities. They would transfer resources without conditions or control, emphasizing Southern leadership in decision-making. The scale would be substantial—trillions rather than millions—reflecting the extent of extraction, and funding would be predictable and sustained, not tied to specific projects.

Solidarity, rather than charity, redefines relationships from donor-recipient to a partnership in shared struggles. It acknowledges that liberation efforts are interconnected—African women's liberation is linked to challenging capitalism, racism, and imperialism that also affect people in the Global North. Supporting others' struggles is seen as part of collective liberation, not charity.

Solidarity-based relationships would involve mutual accountability and shared learning, rather than one-way reporting; strategic collaboration rather than donor-driven agendas; honest communication, including criticism; long-term commitments instead of conditional aid; and a willingness to take political and financial risks, rather than avoiding risk.

Funding movements instead of individual projects emphasizes supporting organizations' core operations, networks, and coalitions, as well as organizing and mobilization efforts. This includes long-term capacity and leadership development, as well as resourcing movement infrastructure such as communications, research, and convening spaces.

Movement funding understands that social change occurs through sustained organizing over many years rather than short-term projects. It focuses on building collective power instead of merely delivering services. This involves supporting processes such as consciousness-raising, organizing, and mobilization that are difficult to capture with logframes and traditional theories of change. Funding for systems change aims to challenge structural oppression rather than just managing its symptoms. This includes funding advocacy efforts that oppose laws, policies, and institutions, supporting organizing that amplifies the power of marginalized communities, financing campaigns against corporations, governments, and international bodies, and supporting work that confronts capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and other systemic issues. Systems change work is inherently risky, long-term, and complex to measure with conventional metrics. Success is reflected in shifts in power dynamics, changes in public discourse, policy reforms, and institutional transformations—outcomes resulting from collective action over many years and not attributable to a single organization or project. Donors must accept uncertainty and support initiatives whose impacts may only become visible after decades.

What African Feminist Movements Demand: The Shift the Power Movement

African feminist organizations are actively pursuing transformation through collective advocacy rather than waiting for donors to initiate reform. The "Shift the Power" movement unites grassroots organizations across the Global South in demanding fundamental changes to aid mechanisms. Their key demands include: granting decision-making authority to the Global South, with local actors prioritizing and strategizing based on their needs; ensuring funding is flexible, long-term, and unrestricted, allowing organizations to operate with core, multi-year grants without restrictions; simplifying accountability processes to be reciprocal, local-language reporting, and participatory evaluation focusing on learning; fostering fair partnerships that share power, respect expertise, and are built on mutual respect; supporting movement building through funding organizing, leadership, and coalition development; and adopting reparative, transformative approaches that acknowledge colonial legacies and challenge oppressive systems, not just manage their symptoms. Additionally, African feminist organizations highlight the need to fund controversial issues such as abortion, LGBTQI+ rights, and sex worker organizing, support grassroots movements beyond professional NGOs, ensure fair compensation for feminist labor, and invest in feminist knowledge creation rather than only service delivery.

Reimagining North-South Solidarity

RFLD is dedicated to creating various models of international solidarity that focus on African women's leadership, shift power and resources, and promote grassroots feminist activism. We advocate for reforming the aid system through policy dialogue with governments, foundations, and international bodies, engaging in movements like Shift the Power, documenting the negative impacts of aid and exploring alternatives, and amplifying African feminist voices. Our own work exemplifies alternative approaches by involving participatory decision-making with member organizations, offering flexible support to grassroots groups, utilizing minimal reporting while ensuring accountability, working in local languages, and building movement infrastructure

rather than only executing projects. We foster South-South solidarity through Pan-African networks that link organizations across Africa, share resources, strategies, and support, and strengthen regional and continental movements. We view Northern allies as partners in solidarity, not just donors, by educating them about the colonial roots of aid, encouraging Northern activists to influence their governments and foundations, establishing partnerships based on mutual respect and shared justice goals, and collaborating to overhaul global systems that perpetuate inequality.

African feminist movements will continue to fight for justice, regardless of resource availability. They have always done so. The key question is whether international solidarity will genuinely support their efforts through genuine partnership and resource sharing, or continue to exploit their energy and resources under the guise of empowerment.

Decolonizing aid involves recognizing that African women are not problems to be solved with Northern solutions, but rather leaders with the vision, strategies, and power to change their societies. Resources should support their work, not control it. Relationships should be built on trust, respect, and solidarity, rather than paternalism and conditionalities. It requires transforming global economic and political structures that sustain inequality, not merely improving aid programs.

RFLD urges donors, Northern NGOs, foundations, and governments to join us in this transformation. Shift power dynamics. Share resources based on trust. Prioritize African women's leadership. Build solidarity rather than charity. Support justice movements instead of projects that manage injustice. Change the system, not just reform aid.

The liberation of African women and other oppressed groups depends on access to resources. These resources are present, particularly in the Global North, having been accumulated over centuries of extraction. Justice means returning these resources to support liberation struggles without control or conditions. This is not charity but reparation. This is not aid but solidarity. This is not development but decolonization. This is the demand and the vision. The question remains whether those in power will respond or if African women's movements will continue fighting for liberation despite, rather than alongside, international support.

CONCLUSION

This journal has explored the complex and urgent landscape of African women's fight for liberation. Through fourteen articles, it covers issues such as violence against women human rights defenders, digital threats, shrinking civic space, funding crises, Pan-African organizing, political participation, reproductive justice, climate change, LGBTQI+ rights, economic justice, intergenerational dynamics, peace and security, legal warfare, and international solidarity. Each piece highlights both oppression and resistance, analyzing the structures that limit African women while acknowledging the movements striving for change. Several themes emerge, revealing patterns in African feminist efforts. First, African women are active agents of change, not mere victims. They organize, resist, innovate, and lead, often with limited resources and under severe constraints. Second, oppressions intersect and cannot be separated—gender injustice is intertwined with racism, colonialism, capitalism, heterosexism, ableism, and other systems of domination. Third, true transformation involves both structural reforms and cultural shifts. Legal changes, economic redistribution, and political representation are vital but need to be complemented by transforming patriarchal cultures and awareness. Fourth, African women's liberation is linked to broader struggles for decolonization, economic justice, and dismantling oppressive structures. Fifth, solidarity and collective action are crucial; individual progress without collective power risks reinforcing elite dominance and leaving systemic inequalities unchallenged. As we finish this journal and look ahead, questions arise: What does the future hold for African feminist movements? What challenges and opportunities are on the horizon? What strategies, visions, and solidarities will propel liberation? How can current struggles be built upon to foster real transformation?

Current African feminist movements are both expanding in strength and facing new threats. Recognizing this paradox is crucial for effective future planning. Over the past twenty years, these movements have experienced significant growth, marked by an increase in feminist organizations and the formation of networks and coalitions that span local, regional, and continental levels. An influx of young feminists has injected new energy, perspectives, and methods. Feminist analyses have evolved significantly, integrating decades of African feminist thought with contemporary intersectional approaches. These movements have achieved key victories in legal reforms, political inclusion, and public debate. African women’s feminist scholarship has thrived, producing complex theories that have been published both locally and internationally. Activist-researchers document struggles, analyze their contexts, and develop strategies. Digital platforms enable cross-border and multilingual knowledge sharing. African feminists are increasingly challenging Western frameworks that often misrepresent or exclude their experiences, emphasizing African women's knowledge and leadership. Young African feminists are transforming movements. They organize through social media, reaching millions with feminist messages. They challenge respectability politics that constrained earlier feminist generations. They center queer and transgender liberation as integral to feminism, not separate or secondary. They connect local struggles to global movements, building transnational solidarity. They experiment with new forms of organizing—such as hashtag campaigns, digital activism, and creative protest—alongside traditional strategies.

African feminist movements have achieved significant policy victories. Domestic violence laws exist in over 30 African countries, secured through feminist advocacy. Constitutional reforms in multiple countries have guaranteed gender equality and reserved seats for women in parliament. Legal reforms have expanded

grounds for legal abortion, strengthened sexual violence laws, and established equal inheritance and property rights. These victories, although incomplete in implementation, provide tools that women can utilize and frameworks for ongoing advocacy.

African feminist movements face significant hurdles that threaten to undo progress and limit future advancements. As feminist victories have grown, backlash against women's rights has intensified. Conservative religious and political groups mobilize against gender equality, framing women's rights as Western impositions that threaten African and spiritual values. They oppose reproductive rights, LGBTQI+ equality, and feminist activism. Governments' pressure to restrict civic space, reject international human rights standards, and reverse legal reforms. This opposition operates across borders, with conservative networks sharing strategies and resources across Africa and beyond. Civic space shrinks due to repressive laws, bureaucratic hurdles, surveillance, and violence that hinder feminist organizing. Governments pass laws limiting NGO work, foreign funding, and freedoms of assembly and speech. They monitor activists, infiltrate groups, and use anti-terror laws to criminalize dissent. Women human rights defenders face threats, harassment, arrests, and violence. The space for feminist activities is narrowing continent-wide, making it harder for movements to operate. Funding shortfalls threaten organizational stability and the strength of the movement. As noted in Article 14, African feminist groups receive minimal international aid despite rhetoric supporting women's empowerment. Donor priorities shift, leaving organizations without consistent funding. Economic downturns and COVID-19 have reduced resources while increasing demands. Organizations struggle to pay staff, run programs, and stay afloat, often facing impossible choices between survival and mission. Multiple crises intersect, posing huge challenges. Economic hardship impoverishes millions amid austerity measures that cut social services. Climate change causes droughts, floods, and displacement. Conflicts persist in various regions, with women disproportionately affected by violence and displacement. COVID-19 has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths while worsening inequality and gender violence. These crises demand responses that drain movement resources and capacity. Political authoritarianism is on the rise across Africa, shrinking democratic space as leaders consolidate their power. Many change constitutions to extend terms, rig elections, repress opposition, control courts, and censor media. Feminist movements, which challenge patriarchal authority and demand accountability, are particularly impacted. Governments restrict women's organizing, co-opt movements into state-controlled frameworks, and repress feminist activism and dissent.

Internal movement challenges encompass generational tensions, the urban-rural divide, class disparities, disagreements concerning goals and strategies, donor dependency that fosters competition rather than collaboration, NGO-driven depoliticization, and activist burnout caused by excessive workloads and limited resources. These issues demand meticulous attention, even as movements confront external threats. Several pivotal factors will influence the trajectory of African feminist movements. The manner in which these issues are addressed will determine whether African feminism attains genuine transformative impact or continues to remain on the periphery. Digital tools are transforming activism by offering substantial opportunities alongside emerging risks. Feminist groups must navigate this landscape with careful deliberation. Digital platforms facilitate rapid mobilization, enabling activists to connect across distances and streamline campaign efforts. Social media amplifies feminist messages, reaching audiences beyond traditional gatherings or academic circles. Online spaces foster communities for LGBTQI+ Africans enduring stigma and isolation. Compared to

physical events, digital organizing reduces costs, thereby enhancing accessibility to activism. Many young feminists regard digital activism as an exceptionally effective strategy. Nonetheless, digital spaces also entail risks. Online harassment, threats, doxxing, and sexual violence can traumatize activists and silence dissenting voices. Governments may utilize surveillance tools to monitor activists. Misinformation campaigns aim to undermine feminist initiatives. Large corporations control platforms that prioritize profit, often at the expense of safety. Algorithms can propagate hate speech while suppressing feminist content. Looking ahead, feminist movements must develop advanced digital strategies that capitalize on these opportunities while effectively managing the associated risks. This includes digital security training, advocacy for platform accountability, the development of feminist-friendly technologies, and the integration of online and offline activism. Significantly, digital endeavors should complement rather than replace grassroots organizing, maintaining strong community ties, and avoiding elitism that privileges those with access to technology.

Climate change poses an existential threat to Africa, especially to women who rely on climate-sensitive livelihoods but contribute least to the problem. Feminist movements must prioritize climate justice as a core issue. Africa faces severe droughts damaging agriculture and pastoralism, floods destroying homes and infrastructure, conflicts over water and land, climate-induced migration, food insecurity affecting millions, and ecosystem loss. Women are disproportionately impacted as primary food producers, water gatherers, and caregivers for families affected by climate change. However, climate policies often exclude women from decision-making and overlook gender-specific impacts and solutions. Climate finance mostly supports mitigation efforts in wealthy nations rather than adaptation in vulnerable regions. Market-based approaches like carbon trading favor corporations and leave affected communities behind. Achieving feminist climate justice means promoting women's leadership, directing climate funds to women-led adaptation projects, safeguarding the rights of climate-displaced people, challenging corporate-driven policies, and linking climate justice with anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, and anti-neocolonial struggles. African feminist movements are increasingly active on these issues, forming alliances with environmental groups and applying feminist analysis to climate advocacy.

Generational divides within feminist movements can undermine their collective strength. The future depends on deliberate intergenerational feminist practices that honor elders' wisdom while supporting young feminists' leadership and innovation. These tensions often appear as older feminists feeling that young feminists dismiss their contributions or lack understanding of political contexts; young feminists perceiving older feminists as resistant to change or too conservative; disagreements over strategy—such as traditional advocacy versus digital activism, or respectability politics versus radical protest—and competition for resources and leadership roles instead of collaboration. However, effective movements need both elders' institutional knowledge, political connections, and strategic insights, along with young feminists' energy, innovation, and readiness to challenge norms. Intergenerational feminist efforts tend to be stronger than those segmented by age. Building these movements involves mentorship programs linking young and older feminists, leadership transitions that honor elders while empowering youth, spaces for honest discussions about differences, collaborative strategizing that leverages diverse strengths, and resource sharing over competition. RFLD intentionally works to bridge these generational gaps, creating environments where feminists of all ages can lead and learn together.

LGBTQI+ rights face increasing opposition across Africa, where over 30 countries have criminalized same-sex relationships. LGBTQI+ Africans endure violence, discrimination, and persecution. Some African feminists marginalize LGBTQI+ issues, viewing them as divisive or Western imports. However, queer and transgender liberation is fundamental to feminist liberation. Heterosexism and cisgenderism, as aspects of patriarchy, perpetuate gender hierarchies by policing sexuality and gender identity. Homophobia and transphobia affect all women, punishing gender non-conformity. Africans who are LGBTQI+ have histories that predate colonialism, despite claims that queerness is a Western influence. Feminism in Africa that ignores LGBTQI+ liberation continues to uphold oppression. The future must see African feminism prioritize queer and trans liberation as essential to dismantling patriarchy, involving support for LGBTQI+ organizations and activists, challenging homophobia and transphobia within feminist movements and society, advocating for LGBTQI+ rights through policy, and applying intersectional analysis of how heterosexism and cisgenderism intersect with other forms of oppression. Young African feminists are leading this charge, and movements must follow their guidance.

Feminist movements need to oppose NGOization, which depoliticizes struggles and directs activism toward professional development projects. This entails focusing on organizing and mobilization instead of just service delivery, ensuring accountability to grassroots groups rather than donors, creating membership-based organizations instead of staff-led NGOs, promoting collective leadership over executive directors, and committing to long-term transformative efforts instead of short-term projects. Building movements involves developing leadership, political education, strategic planning, and relationship-building. It requires creating spaces for collective analysis and strategizing, organizing communities to gain power rather than simply providing services, and forming alliances and coalitions to strengthen efforts power.

Feminist movements must adopt an intersectional approach, rejecting false choices between different oppressions. This involves addressing gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and other identity dimensions simultaneously; building inclusive movements that encompass women from various classes, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, and abilities; forming alliances with movements against racism, economic exploitation, environmental harm, and authoritarianism; and developing an analysis of how oppressions interconnect and reinforce each other. Although intersectional organizing is complex, requiring us to navigate differences and foster unity across diversity, it remains crucial because oppressions are linked, and true liberation depends on transforming all oppressive systems. Movements that focus on a single oppression while marginalizing others ultimately fail to achieve complete liberation anyone.

African feminist liberation depends on Pan-African solidarity and coordination. Since issues affecting African women—such as neocolonialism, corporate exploitation, religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and climate change—transcend borders, resistance must also be transnational. Pan-African feminist organizing facilitates resource and strategy sharing, regional and continental advocacy, cross-national solidarity, and a unified voice in global forums. It bolsters national movements through regional support. The RFLD network, with 420 member organizations across Africa, exemplifies the strength of Pan-African organizing. Through regional gatherings, joint campaigns, resource exchanges, and political education, members support each other and cultivate a continental movement. This solidarity should continue to deepen while respecting national and regional distinctions diversity.

Transformations demand the use of multiple strategies at the same time. Feminist movements need to employ legal advocacy to challenge discriminatory laws and hold governments responsible; policy engagement to shape legislation and regulations; grassroots organizing to strengthen community power; public education to change perceptions and culture; media engagement to influence public opinion; strategic litigation to set legal precedents; protests and direct actions to create crises and pressure responses; research and documentation to generate knowledge and evidence; and building alternative institutions to exemplify feminist ideals.

No single approach is sufficient. Legal wins depend on grassroots efforts to enforce them. Grassroots organizing requires policy change to turn progress into reality. Policy engagement without social movements results in superficial reforms. Movements must strategically combine these approaches, adapting to different contexts opportunities.

Feminist movements must build South-South solidarity, connecting African feminists with feminists in Asia, Latin America, and other regions in the Global South, which often face shared issues such as colonialism, economic exploitation, and dominance by Northern powers. South-South movements foster mutual support without creating hierarchical distinctions, unlike North-South divides. Their efforts include exchanging strategies and resources, coordinating advocacy at international levels, learning from each other's struggles, and building global movements against imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. While recognizing regional differences—such as distinctions between African, Asian, and Latin American feminism—they aim to unite around everyday struggles.

The Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement is dedicated to strengthening African feminist movements capable of driving transformation. Our upcoming work will focus on several strategic priorities outlined in this journal's analysis:

- Enhancing capacity within member organizations and networks: We will continue supporting our 420 members through capacity-building initiatives, resource provision, and networking efforts. Efforts will include deepening Pan-African connections, strengthening regional alliances, and forming coalitions around shared objectives.

- Supporting women human rights defenders: We will offer protection, security training, and emergency aid for defenders at risk, advocate for a safe environment and accountability for attacks, and amplify their voices to honor their bravery.

- Promoting women's political engagement: Our focus will be on supporting women candidates, advocating electoral reforms, challenging violence against women in politics, and fostering feminist leadership that transforms political institutions beyond just increasing women's representation.

- Defending sexual and reproductive rights: Our advocacy will include pushing for legal abortion, comprehensive sexuality education, and accessible reproductive healthcare. We will oppose religious fundamentalism that limits women's bodily autonomy and support grassroots efforts on reproductive rights justice.

Promoting economic justice: We will advocate for land rights, fair wages, social protections, and policies that benefit women. We aim to challenge neoliberal capitalism and support alternative approaches, linking feminist efforts with labor and peasant movements.

Building feminist climate justice movements: We will support African women's leadership in climate responses and advocate for climate finance that reaches women. Additionally, we will connect climate justice to broader feminist struggles against capitalism and imperialism.

Centering LGBTQI+ liberation: We will support LGBTQI+ organizations and activists, challenge homophobia and transphobia within feminist and societal contexts, and push for LGBTQI+ rights in policy discussions.

Transforming aid and international solidarity: Our goal is to promote aid system reforms, including participatory grantmaking, trust-based funding, and reparative strategies. We seek to develop alternative North-South solidarity models rooted in justice rather than charity.

Producing and sharing feminist knowledge: We will document African feminist struggles, analyze their contexts, develop strategies, and disseminate knowledge across movements. Special emphasis will be placed on centering African women's knowledge and challenging Northern knowledge monopolies.

Supporting young feminist leadership: We plan to invest in young feminists through mentorship, training, resources, and leadership opportunities. Our focus is on bridging generational gaps to harness the benefits of both elder wisdom and youth innovation.

Transformation requires time. African women have fought for liberation for centuries—resisting patriarchy in pre-colonial societies, opposing colonial rule, demanding rights after independence, and organizing through authoritarian regimes and economic crises. Today’s struggles continue this long legacy of resistance.

We cannot foresee when liberation will be fully achieved. Deeply rooted oppressive systems are guarded by powerful interests, and setbacks are unavoidable. Nevertheless, African women persevere across generations, building on past efforts and adjusting to new circumstances.

This persistence demands patience—understanding that real change comes gradually through ongoing organizing, not quick fixes or lone heroics. It calls for strategic planning to gradually build power while holding onto revolutionary ideals. It also involves caring for activists and movements, preventing burnout through mutual support, shared leadership, celebrating small wins, and recognizing that rest is a form of resistance.

However, patience should not lead to passivity. Critical crises call for swift action. Women face deadly threats from unsafe abortions, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, and conflict. Communities are displaced by climate change and land dispossession. Rights are being progressively stripped away. Movements must respond urgently without losing sight of long-term goals.

Finding this balance—responding urgently while pursuing lasting transformation, ensuring immediate survival alongside revolutionary change—is a continuous challenge. There are no set formulas, only guiding principles: prioritize those most affected by oppression; build collective power rather than individual success; tackle root causes while addressing symptoms; keep hope alive amid harsh realities; and refuse to give up.

This journal captures both oppression and resistance, analyzing the structures that limit African women while highlighting movements fighting for liberation. It outlines significant challenges—such as backlash, repression, funding shortages, and intersecting crises—that confront African feminist movements. Nonetheless, it also showcases the remarkable organizing, resilience, and vision of African women.

African feminist futures are achievable. They are not predetermined—they depend on organizing, struggle, and solidarity. They are not utopian—they will develop through complex, contested processes involving setbacks and compromises. They are not uniform—different visions will shape various futures across different contexts. But they are possible.

These futures will be built by African women organizing in communities, workplaces, schools, and streets; by women human rights defenders documenting violations and demanding justice; by feminist lawyers pursuing strategic litigation; by women politicians reforming institutions from within while movements exert pressure from outside; by grassroots organizers building collective power; by young feminists leveraging social media alongside traditional activism; by researchers producing knowledge; by artists fostering cultural change; and by all contributing to collective struggle in diverse ways.

RFLD is proud to support this organizing across Africa. We do not lead African feminist movements—grassroots organizations and activists do. We facilitate, resource, amplify, and connect. We learn from member organizations and share resources and strategies. We celebrate victories alongside struggles. We remain hopeful while addressing challenges honestly.

To all African feminists—activists, organizers, defenders, researchers, artists, elders, and youth—reading this journal: Your work matters. Your struggles are part of a long liberation history spanning generations. Your victories, no matter how small, help drive collective transformation. Your perseverance amid opposition shows extraordinary courage. Your visions of free futures inspire us all.

To allies in Africa and worldwide supporting African feminist movements: Your solidarity is vital. But true solidarity requires more than words. It involves sharing resources and power; amplifying African women's voices while knowing when to listen; committing long-term, beyond fleeting attention; and challenging oppressive systems in your own contexts that negatively impact African women globally.

The future of African feminist movements is being crafted today through the organizing, resistance, and visions of countless women across the continent and diaspora. This future will be feminist, Pan-African, intersectional, and transformative. It will confront all forms of oppression—patriarchy, capitalism, racism, imperialism, heterosexism, and ableism. It will prioritize the most marginalized. It will be radically democratic, with power shared equitably. It will honor African knowledge and leadership. It will connect to global struggles while remaining rooted in African realities.

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