GENDER LINKS
FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

WOMEN'S VOICE & LEADERSHIP SOUTH AFRICA

POLICY BRIEF

OCTOBER 2025

AFRICAN FEMINISMS

Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the complexities, evolution, and contemporary challenges of African feminism. Despite significant progress in gender equality across the continent, the term "feminism" remains contested and often misunderstood, particularly in rural settings. Many organisations prefer identifying as promoters of gender equality rather than as feminist or women's rights organisations, highlighting the need for a more precise, shared understanding.

The brief distinguishes African feminisms from Western counterparts by emphasising context-specific struggles, such as anti-colonial resistance, intersectionality, and the importance of integrating African cultural values. It outlines the historical development of African feminism - from early activists and liberation movements to the present - and typifies strands such as radical, Afrocentric, grassroots, liberal, and millennial feminisms.

The policy brief acknowledges ongoing generational tensions, critiques of "white feminism," and debates about men's roles in feminist movements. It highlights African feminism's core values of inclusivity, activism, and Ubuntu. It calls for the movement to address persistent challenges such as gender-based violence, discriminatory cultural practices, and unequal access to resources and decision-making spaces.

The future of African feminism lies in leveraging both digital and offline platforms to mobilise collective action, ensuring movements are accessible to all African women. The brief concludes by urging the adoption of a uniquely African feminism that combines theory and lived realities, bridges generational divides, and anchors itself in solidarity and transformative change across the continent.

Introduction - A brief history of global feminisms

Feminism is a term that was coined in the West in the mid-1800s, organised primarily around the mobilisation for women's suffrage in Europe and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Feminism is not homogeneous; there are different forms of feminism, each with a complicated history of values, ideas, and people that are sometimes in conflict with one another.

The term plural feminisms refers to the recognition that feminism is not a single, unified movement or ideology, but rather a collection of diverse theories, practices, and identities that reflect different histories, cultures, and lived experiences. In other words, there isn't just one way to be a feminist or to pursue gender equality - there are many.

The ***'First Wave'*** feminism had a fairly straightforward goal: to have society recognise that women are humans, not property. Leaders of the 1st-wave feminism were abolitionists, and their focus was on white women's rights, an issue that afflicted the feminist movement for decades to come.[1] The first wave of feminism waned following the passage of the U.S. Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which gave women the right to vote, as well as the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century.

Feminism "revived" in the late 1960s and early 1970s as ***'Second Wave'*** feminism, which built on first-wave feminism and challenged what women's role in society should be, focusing on the institutions that held women back. In this wave, feminists questioned traditional gender and family roles. Major victories of this wave included the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Roe v. Wade in 1973, which gave American women the right to have an abortion; and queer theory became more recognised as a feminist issue. Three main types of feminism emerged during this wave: *Mainstream feminism* focused on institutional reforms, which meant reducing gender discrimination, giving women access to male-dominated spaces, and promoting equality. *Radical feminism* wanted to reshape society entirely, saying that the system was inherently patriarchal and only an overhaul would bring liberation. It resisted the belief that men and women were basically the same. *Cultural feminism* had a similar view and taught that there's a "female essence" that's distinct from men.[2]

Building on the institutional victories of the 2nd wave of feminism, which gave women more rights and power, ***'Third-Wave'*** feminism of the 1990s started to grapple with other aspects of their identity, such as sexual orientation and gender identity. It was characterised by embracing individuality and rebellion. While the 1st and 2nd waves of feminism largely ignored racial disparities, the 3rd wave became more conscious of race. Kimberle Crenshaw, a gender and critical-race scholar, coined the phrase "intersectionality" in 1989. The term refers to how different kinds of oppression - like those based on gender, race, class and disability - intersect with each other. The phrase "third-wave feminism" was coined in 1992 by Rebecca Walker, a 23-year-old Black bisexual woman. With the advancement and growing use of technology, it became easier to hear perspectives and ideas from feminists around the world, expanding the movement.

While there may not have been a significant shift in ideology, due to the resurgence of attacks on women's rights and the MeToo movement, some feminists believe we have entered the ***'Fourth wave'*** of feminism, which is said to have begun around 2012. The use of social media for activism has propelled the movement firmly into the technological age. Fourth-wave feminism continues to grapple with intersectionality. Many fourth-wave feminists are working to combat the exclusion of trans women and other non-binary individuals, who have been excluded in previous waves of feminism. As with every wave before it, the fourth wave is complex. It encompasses many movements that both complement and clash. This tension is unavoidable.

While some forms of feminism can be harmful, a diverse range of voices makes feminism more inclusive and effective. The climate crisis has also come into sharp focus in this wave, with feminist movements demanding that women have a seat at the table and that all solutions to the crisis are informed by feminist knowledge and principles. Though there is still contention on the issue of trans women's rights and there are still opposing factions of feminists, for example, in Spain, there are trans-exclusionary radical feminists, who reject the assertion that Trans women are women and support the exclusion of trans women from women's spaces and struggles and Trans inclusive feminists (TIFs) on the other hand.

While Western feminisms have played a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms, their focus has

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

often reflected the particular histories, cultures, and priorities of Europe and North America. However, as the global movement for gender justice has evolved, it has become increasingly clear that feminist theory and activism cannot be understood through a singular, universal lens. To truly embrace the diversity of feminist thought, it is vital to recognise the distinct trajectories and lived experiences that have shaped feminisms worldwide, particularly in Africa.

African Feminisms

Western feminism has remained contentious and perceived as incompatible with African values, but like Western feminism, African feminisms are complex and not homogenous. For example, the experiences and problems faced by women in North Africa differ considerably from those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Views of African feminisms vary widely across the African continent and in the diaspora. There are ongoing debates on African feminism in scholarly publications and at international seminars. Some see feminism as a Western import, compared in some ways with cultural imperialism and (post-) colonialism.[3]

African feminisms, rooted in the continent's own histories, values, and ongoing struggles against colonialism, present a unique perspective - one that centres African women's realities, resists simplistic labels, and fosters forms of activism deeply connected to local cultures and community needs. The following section explores these diverse African feminist traditions, highlighting how they both intersect with and diverge from their Western counterparts.[4]

In many African countries, feminism is a contentious term that has often been construed as being "anti-men." Feminism can be understood or interpreted in very different ways. The term "feminism" encompasses a wide range of beliefs and practices, and its meaning can vary significantly across cultural, social, and political contexts. As a result, people perceive and interpret feminism in very different ways, leading to confusion, debate, and even resistance to its role in society.[5]

The discomfort with the term feminism

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

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

Linked to this is the role of men in addressing women's rights, which is seen as an essential component for the work, one focus group member in a rural area said: *"This gender inequality is not a problem for women. It is a problem for society. We need men's involvement to say why gender is important. As a country and society, we have focused on women trying to solve gender inequality. It is not fair; the victim shouldn't have to solve the problems on their own. Men are the perpetrators and must be involved in the solution."*

There are also positive views on feminism, *"The feminist approach does empower individuals. I didn't know I was a feminist before, but when they explained what it really was, I identified with it. Being a feminist for me boosts me to stand up for myself and be a leader."*

Excerpts from the results from the Women's Voice and Leadership grantee organisation survey report[6]

[3] Lilian Lem Atanga, 'African Feminism', African Studies Centre Leiden, 30 November 2021, https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/african-feminism
[4] What is African feminism and Actually? Says, 'What Is African Feminism, Actually?', 6 December 2017, https://msafropolitan.com/2017/12/what-is-african-feminism-actually.html
[5] Ayesha Imam et al., 'The African Feminist Forum Is an Independent Feminist Platform. It Has Been Hosted since Its Inception by the African Women's Development Fund.', n.d.
[6] The brief is enriched by anecdotes for a series of dialogues on Feminisms in Women's Month (2022) on the topics: Demystifying Feminism, African Feminism and Feminist Leadership.

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

African feminism spectrum

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

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

One year before the formation of the Organisation of African Union OAU, the forerunner of today's AU, African women gathered in Tanzania. They formed the Pan Africanist Women's Organisation (PAWO) on 31st July 1962. They focused on the need for African women to unite in a struggle against colonialism and gender inequality. They could be considered one of the first transnational African feminist organisations.

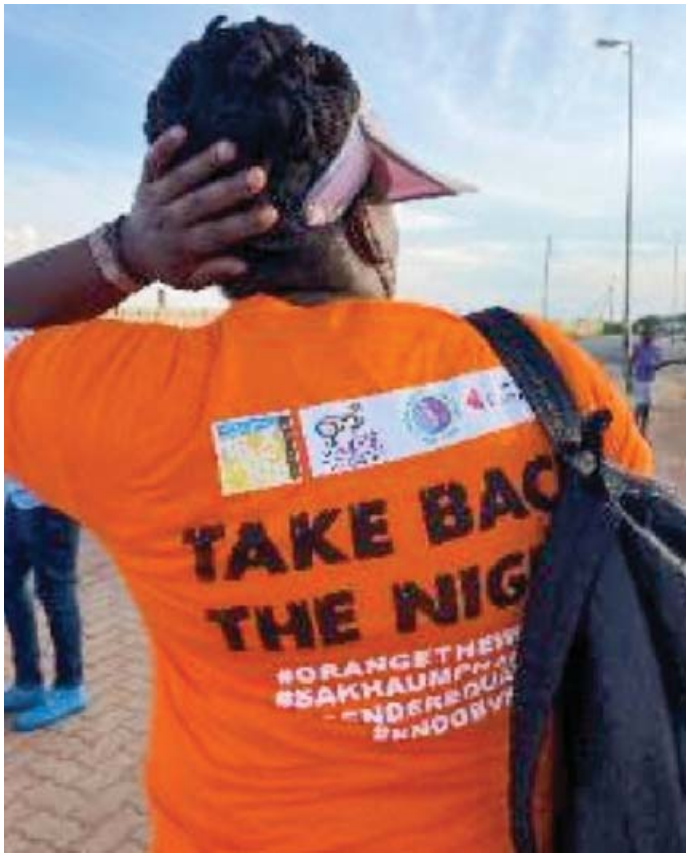
> "None of us at that time used feminism in our terminology or even definitions for many reasons, including that some of the very feminists, especially in the Western countries, saw us as terrorists, while others saw Africa as the research centres for their theoretical/ideological/academic studies on the poor African Women. A lot of patronising by the very Western feminists was the order of the day."
>
> *Ambassador and former commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Thenjiwe Mtintso*

Postcolonial African feminism

From 1960 to the 2000s, an era inspired mainly by Black and Third World feminisms elsewhere, small groups of African women began identifying as feminists. The landmark UN decade for women, 1975 - 1985, further entrenched modern African feminism and led to the spread of feminist activism and scholarship across the continent and the diaspora. Since then, the African feminist movement has expanded across policy, legislation, scholarship, and the cultural realm.

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

Radical African Feminism focuses on challenging patriarchy and traditional cultural and social norms. It challenges the heteronormative family structure, as well as promotes the rights of LGBTQI persons and sex workers, as opposed to more conservative African feminists who remain distinctly pro-heterosexual (if not homophobic, sometimes citing religious reasons. Radical African Feminism is marked by "Voice". Examples of Radical African feminists include Bessie Head, Awa Thiam, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal el Saadawi, and Mariama Bâ; scholars such as Amina Mama, Patricia MacFadden, and Ayesha Imam.



Afrocentric African Feminism is marked by grappling with the un-Africanness and western-isation, debating and disagreeing about the conflict between Western and African values. Theories like "Motherism" emerged in this group as a form of feminisms that centre African values, and which are not always progressive; there may be essentialist and homophobic values imported into this African feminist thinking. This form of feminism sought to preserve African culture.

Grassroots African Feminism and development-focused postcolonial African feminism largely emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, especially after the landmark UN Decade for Women 1975 - 1985, which spurred coalition-building and funding for feminist activism and scholarship across the continent and diaspora. It focused on so-called 'bread and butter' issues such as poverty reduction, anti-FGM and violence prevention, but also on intellectual activism concerning these issues. The Maputo Protocol is arguably predominantly an outcome of this type of feminism.[7]

Contemporary African Feminisms

Today, African feminisms refer to feminism located in any of the above three strands. Still, with the advent of the internet, blogs and social media, more African feminisms categories have emerged since the 2000s:

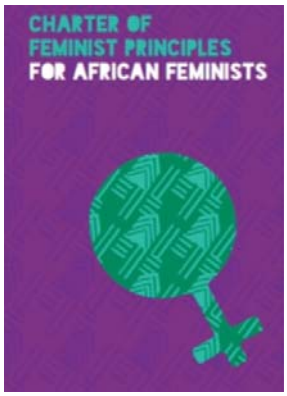
Liberal African Feminism has successfully championed feminist discussions about domestic gender roles, gender gaps and sexual rights. This strand of African feminism has made great strides in mainstreaming African feminism and bringing empowerment concepts to the masses. Still, it has perhaps failed to examine neoliberal capitalist values critically.

Millennial or 4th wave African Feminism may be considered the most explicitly feminist generation in Africa. This African feminism is marked by student protests, a fierce, vociferous, and woke new voice. This feminism has reinvigorated African feminism through marches and demonstrations, coupled with high social media activity. It has been very influential in calling out sexual violence against women, as the current '16 Days' campaign shows. The criticism of this feminism is that, generally speaking, it does not engage with African feminist theory to the extent it would need to in order also to reform political life.

Afropolitan Feminism describes the work and activism of 21st-century Africans in Euro-America who challenge Western discourses that malign Africa and connect women on the African continent to African women in the diaspora, adopting a transnational, future-oriented approach to feminist liberation.[8]

[7] Ms Afropolitan, A brief history of African Feminism, July 2013, https://msafropolitan.com/2013/07/a-brief-history-of-african-feminism.html#:~:text=Modern%20African%20feminism%20was%20solidified,also%20in%20the%20cultural%20realm. Accessed 27 June 2022
[8] Lilian Lem Atanga, 'African Feminism'. John Benjamins Publishing Company, March 2013

Charter of African Feminist Principles for African Feminists



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

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

Feminism in Southern Africa

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

There are several examples of how feminist stalwarts have played a central role in advancing women's rights in the region. Sara Longwe, a Zambian feminist activist, is known for creating the Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework. She played a pivotal role in securing paid maternity leave in Zambia in the 1970s, was central to the country's ratification of the UN CEDAW Convention and helped enact inheritance laws that benefited women. She also co-founded the Zambian NGOCC, a central advocacy body for women's rights, and has been active in founding numerous organisations focused on advancing women's empowerment regionally and globally.

Feminism in South Africa has been shaped by Women who played a central role as political activists in the liberation struggle against apartheid and the emancipation of black women in South Africa. However, this was not always easy, as the fight for gender equality was seen as secondary to the fight against apartheid and racial injustice.

[9] Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama et al

Several iconic female freedom fighters were deeply involved in the struggle for South Africa's liberation, to name just a few: **Winnie Madikizela-Mandela** is the well- known-political activist who refused to stay silent in times of Apartheid oppression and despite being arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and constantly harassed in her own home, Winnie remained a dedicated servant to the liberation of South Africa. **Fatima Meer** was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) and was one of the inspirational women who led the famous Women's March in August 1956. **Charlotte Maxeke** led the way in establishing the ANC Women's League and encouraging women to engage in the struggle for freedom. **Albertina Sisulu**, **Helen Joseph**, and **Lilian Ngoyi** played a powerful role in the formation of FEDSAW, spearheading the women's march alongside other prominent female political leaders who protested amendments to the pass laws in 1956. **Ruth First** worked as an investigative journalist and editor, focusing on the social injustices of the Apartheid government, and she published several books on feminism and equality in South Africa. **Helen Suzman** was a founding member of the Apartheid government's opposition party, the Progressive Party. She was internationally recognised for her work as a human rights activist, earning hetwo nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize before she death in 2009.

Ambassador and former commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), **Thenjiwe Mtintso**, describes this dual struggle, "In the 'trenches' we had to fight not only against apartheid, but we had to fight on the gender front as patriarchy was alive and kicking. This is particularly so in the early seventies, when the tendency was to assume that women's liberation would be a by-product of freedom, leading to a focus on the national and class questions. Vicious struggles sometimes open sometimes subtle had to be fought by women and progressive men to ensure that the gender question and elaboration of the triple fold struggles of women... as a class, women and as a racial group, was not only understood but integrated within the so-called main struggle...". She adds: "The naming/labelling for us was not the main driving force for our engagements and activities but the struggle for freedom including emancipating of women was the pillar and what drove us. Even amongst ourselves in those very trenches, we held different views on this vexed question, but had no time to spend on this, as there was a country to be liberated and many reasons to avoid what could be seen by some as divisive."

Young feminists - GEN-Z Rising

Africa is a young population. Children under age 15 account for 41% of the population in 2017, and young persons aged 15 to 24 account for an additional 19% representing 60% of Africa's population, making Africa the world's youngest population.[10] Four of the ten countries with the youngest populations are in Southern Africa - Angola, DRC, Mozambique and Zambia.[11] However, it has some of the oldest leaders.[12] The average age of the ten oldest African leaders is 78.5, compared to 52 for the world's ten most-developed economies.

> "It is not us older women who must try to empower these girls. They are empowering themselves with each other's support. We older women must, above all, place our trust in these girls. After all, they are the experts in their own activism. Moreover, we must support them by making sure they have, access to the resources and power that we older feminists have managed to amass. Girls will take care of the rest themselves."
>
> *Views of a veteran feminist*

Intergenerational conflict is emerging as a significant pressure point, with increasing misunderstandings and disagreements arising between younger and older members of the community. Differing values, communication styles, and expectations regarding social norms, responsibilities, and technological adoption often fuel these tensions. As each generation navigates socio-economic changes and evolving cultural landscapes, these conflicts are manifesting in

[10] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables. Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP/248.
[11] Hoe Myers, 19 of the world's 20 youngest countries are in Africa, We Forum, 30 August 2019, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/youngest-populations-africa/, accessed 25 July 2021
[12] Yinka Adegoke, The world's youngest continent will keep being run by its oldest leaders, Quartz Africa, 28 December 2017, https://qz.com/africa/1162490/the-youngest-continent-keeps-on-being-run-by-the-oldest-leaders/ accessed 24 July 2021

both families and organisational settings, highlighting the urgent need for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Youth in Orange Farm look forward to a better future. *Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna*

Recent protests led by Gen Z across the globe have brought longstanding social and political tensions into sharp focus. In countries from Nepal to Madagascar, young activists have organised mass demonstrations driven by youth dissatis-faction with inequality, governance, and social conditions, including health, education and rising costs. Through social media and inno-vative forms of protest, these young people have drawn international attention to their causes, influenced public opinion, and, at times, even swayed policy decisions. These movements exemplify the powerful shifts that can occur when a new generation becomes motivated, mobilised, and determined to create lasting change in society.

They call us the Disruptive Generation

Carryn Liandol, a young South African WOSSO Fellow, captured her experience as a Gen Zer in a global advocacy space. She says, "At the Women 20 (W20) Summit in South Africa, a space meant to shape the future for all women, young voices were few, and when heard, often dismissed as too loud or too bold. But disruption is not destruction, it's evolution. Gen Z stands at the frontline of new realities: digital transformation, climate crises, mental health struggles, and shifting gender norms. We live the change others discuss in conference halls. Our ideas are not noise; they are the rhythm of progress. So, if believing in equality, inclusion, and innovation makes us disruptive, then maybe disruption is precisely what the W20 needs. Technology is best when it brings people together, not when it leaves them behind. As the world accelerates into the digital era of the 25th century, we cannot dismiss the reality that young people live and breathe this age every day. At the W20 2025 Summit, many youth participants felt specific topics, especially around technology, were overlooked or superficially addressed."

She says, "True inclusion means acknowledging all identities, even those we may not personally relate to. Avoiding these conversations only widens the gap we aim to close. To build genuinely inclusive societies, the W20 must create safe spaces for dialogue, integrate diverse perspectives into policy recommendations, and promote learning exchanges that strengthen mutual respect across regions. Inclusion is not about agreement; it's about understanding, acceptance, and ensuring that no voice is left unheard.

That is why the way forward calls for both reflection and action. The W20, as a platform for shaping global gender equality policies, can take meaningful steps to ensure young people are not just seen but truly heard."

Growing Backlash against women's and LGBTQI rights

While feminism has evolved, women continue to face many of the same issues that feminists faced in the 1800s.

The struggle for women's equal rights has witnessed significant advancements over the past century, challenging deeply entrenched societal norms and advancing gender equality across various realms, from political representation to workplace rights. As a result, alongside these progressive movements, a troubling phenomenon known as "backlash" has emerged, manifesting as a counter-

response aimed at undermining the gains women have achieved in their quest for equality. At the heart of this is the constant struggle between "formal" equality - laws, policies, and pronouncements on paper - and the strong undercurrent of "informal factors" such as socialisation, custom, culture, and religion that militate against these paper provisions.

The re-election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2024 intensified backlash against women's and LGBTQI rights, within the United States, and worldwide. This backlash can take various forms, including legislative rollbacks, public vilification of women activists, and attempts to reinforce traditional gender roles. Such responses not only threaten women's individual agency but also jeopardise the broader societal progress toward equality and justice.

2025 marked the 30th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action served as the global blueprint for achieving gender equality, guiding many countries toward more equitable and just societies. We are in a countdown to 2030, the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the SADC Gender Protocol targets. The Sustainable Development Goals 2024 Report paints a bleak picture, with the latest data showing that progress has stalled or even regressed across various areas despite renewed commitments.

U.S. government foreign aid for women and LGBTQI organisations and programs has been drastically cut or frozen, forcing many organisations to shut down. Programs supporting sexual and reproductive health, gender equity, and LGBTQI rights in developing countries face severe funding gaps. This has resulted in reduced access to healthcare, increased unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and worsened human rights conditions for women and LGBTQI people globally. Other governments have been emboldened to adopt similar rollback policies, amplifying the global backlash against these rights. According to the 2025 *Women's Rights in Review - 30 Years After Beijing Report*, almost one-quarter of countries reported that backlash against gender equality is hampering the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The broader international context is shaped by heightened militarisation, as countries increase defence spending amid ongoing conflicts and a perceived need to protect territorial sovereignty. These factors collectively mean that resources are diverted away from social programs into military budgets, placing additional pressure on rights-based initiatives.

Resistance and backlash occur at four intersecting levels: government, institutions, community, and personal. Addressing gender inequality at the root-in communities and homes can drive long-term, sustainable change.

Why we still need feminism

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

Despite the implementation of numerous progressive policies designed to promote equality, justice, and inclusivity, a significant and ongoing challenge remains changing the underlying attitudes and beliefs of individuals and communities. These deeply rooted social norms and cultural values often persist for generations and can be resistant to change, even in the face of new laws and institutional reforms. As a result, while policy frameworks may advance rapidly on paper, the actual transformation of societal mindsets - necessary for genuine, long-term change - tends to occur much more slowly. This

disconnect underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that address not only policy development but also education, advocacy, and community engagement to shift public perceptions and foster meaningful social progress.

Challenging harmful cultural practices

Members of Traditional Healers Organisation asking the ancestors for help in fighting GBV. *Photo: Traditional Healers Organisation*

Culture is an integral part of African women's identity, and they play a central role in preserving traditions, cultural practices, and beliefs. While some are beneficial to all members of society, others are harmful to women and girls, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage and pregnancy and the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility. Steadfast commitment to maintaining cultural practices that are harmful to women and girls infringes on their rights to live life free from violence, and to realise their full potential. These practices necessitate that women and men challenge harmful cultural practices that may have been acceptable in the past but serve no purpose in a modern society. Culture should not infringe on anyone's ability to realise their human rights. It is essential to interrogate how norms get constructed and what purpose they serve.

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

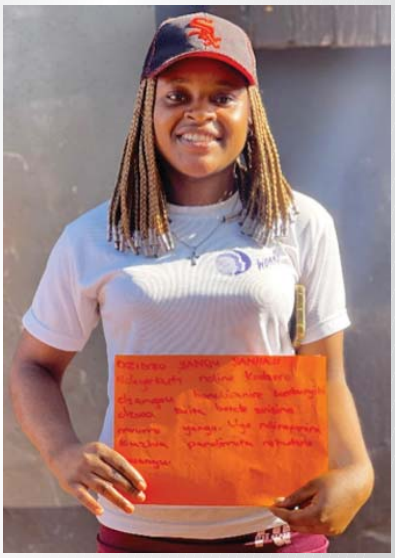
In her 2014 book, Adichie addresses some of the stereotypes that the term 'feminism' evokes. She helps readers to understand that feminism is about the social, economic and political equality of the sexes. "It demands an annihilation of the gender hierarchy and is not about women's rule over men as is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

Women's rights activists, particularly young women across the region, like Women of the South Speak Out (WOSSO) fellows, are discovering firsthand how working with communities to challenge harmful norms and practices can drive lasting social and cultural change.

Traditions, faith, and family hierarchies are not just barriers; they are also entry points.

In Hatcliff, **Zimbabwe**, young feminists are reclaiming the narrative. Through lived languages, storytelling, and community traditions, they are rewriting what SRHR advocacy looks like. Their boldness shows that culture can be a tool of power-not a barrier-and that youth voices are unstoppable in resisting backlash. Lynet Tinoza, a WOSSO Fellow in Zimbabwe, rolled out an Advocacy Project, *SafePath Zimbabwe - Guiding Girls Towards a Secure Future*. Through it, young women and girls were not only equipped with knowledge and skills on SRHR but also empowered to recognise opposition, challenge harmful narratives and boldly reclaim their own stories and future.

It is here that young feminists are reclaiming SRHR defendership and countering backlash, anti-gender, and anti-rights narratives by grounding their advocacy in lived language rather than bureaucratic slogans, ensuring SRHR advocacy and change messaging truly resonate with their community. Over the years, slogans such as "*No means NO*" and "*#WithHer*" have been used by feminists and activists across the country to advocate for the respect of women's rights and bodily autonomy, but, more than anything, they have led to increased resistance and backlash. This is because most communities do not understand or relate to the call to action due to pervasive, harmful gender norms and values that are prevalent and, over the years, have shaped their general belief systems on gender and women's rights. These young women are using an intentional, decolonial and nuanced approach to resist backlash; they are mapping power and influence, recognising that social transformation rarely begins with state actors alone. Rather than centring the state or relying solely on legal enforcement in advocacy against unsafe abortion and EUP, they are prioritising local-level advocacy.



An AGYW posing with her key takeaway session after a Safepath Zimbabwe Dialogue at the Hatcliff Community Hall, in Hatcliff Harare: February 2025

The lesson we can learn from these bold young women is that rather than dismissing cultural norms or community structures, advocacy can work within them to create change that feels authentic and sustainable. Instead of dismissing cultural norms or community structures, advocacy can bend with them like reeds in the wind, finding strength in what already holds communities together.

Lynet Tinoza, Women's Rights Advocate, challenges us all to stop seeing young women and girls as beneficiaries and start seeing them as architects of the future. Give them the tools, the spaces, and the voices they have long been denied, and watch how they flip the script on bodily autonomy, SRHR and resist backlash.

Religion and feminism are not mutually exclusive. For Muslim women who identify as feminists, overtly or not, challenging deeply entrenched religious beliefs and systems is grounded in faith, courage and strength.

Farida Myburgh is a **South African** Muslim Feminist and Gender Advocate who grew up surrounded by strong Muslim women - mothers, aunties, teachers - who held their communities together while battling unseen walls. She says, "Their strength was quiet, often unacknowledged. When I began naming that strength for what it was - *feminism* - I realised our resistance didn't start in conferences or policy papers. It began in our homes, our kitchens, our mosques - in the ways our mothers refused to give up.

Myburgh runs girls' clubs across East London - in Duncan Village, Mdantsane, Amalinda - and sees young women finding their voices. She notes, "Some whisper their stories. Others shout their truth. All of them are brave. Each one reminds me why I must keep speaking, even when it's hard. Myburgh challenges stereotypes and confronts the backlash that arises when women demand justice, arguing

that true faith and feminism go hand in hand. Grounded in courage and inspired by the Qur'an's call for justice, this piece is a rallying cry for solidarity and action - a testament to the power of women leading change, grounded in faith, resilience, and unwavering hope for a just future.

Myburgh calls on parents, teachers, faith leaders, and simply citizens to stand with us. "Teach your daughters their worth. Challenge harmful traditions. Hold leaders accountable. Refuse to be silent. Because the struggle against backlash is not mine alone - it's ours.

And together, we can turn resistance into a new future for Africa's women."

Role of men

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

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

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

Men as allies in building equality in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

ZIMSWA implemented the Men as Supporting Partners (MasP) Club as a sub-grant from SAfAIDS under the Youth PoPs programme. It is a bold initiative that engages men as allies in advancing health, HIV rights, and gender equality for sex workers and other vulnerable groups. MasP challenges harmful masculinities and transforms potential sources of stigma into advocates for change. By shifting mindsets at the community level, the initiative fosters safer spaces, improves access to services, and tackles gender inequality at its roots.

This innovative, community-led model directly addresses the backlash faced by sex workers who are frequently excluded from health systems, stigmatised, and left vulnerable to violence and HIV. Rather than seeing men as adversaries, MasP brings them into the conversation as supportive partners. More than just a local effort, MasP offers a replicable strategy for organisations and countries seeking to build inclusive, rights-based HIV and SRHR responses. It demonstrates that sustainable change is possible when communities work together to reshape norms, support the most marginalised, and uphold dignity for all.

At its core, MasP demonstrates that gender equality is not a women's issue alone. It is a collective responsibility. By tackling gender inequality at its roots, the initiative is building bridges where walls once stood. It is proof that sustainable change happens when everyone, regardless of gender, plays a role in dismantling stigma and upholding human rights.

The African Feminism We Want[13]

During a series of Feminism Dialogues in 2022, we posed the question, 'What is the African Feminism we want?" The response - We want African feminisms that push for inclusivity, the active involvement of men as allies, and the transformation of both culture and policy to achieve gender justice. It stresses the value of Ubuntu - solidarity and collective support - and asserts that feminism must address the specific lived realities of African women. The future of African feminism is seen as a blend of activism, volunteerism, and grassroots and digital mobilisation, informed by tradition and open to reform and innovation.

This feminism transcends multi-generational tensions, respects and values older feminists' experiences, and gives space to, supports, listens to, and learns from young feminists. An African feminism that will remove the them-and-us divide and recognise the intersectionality and embeddedness of many identities. It recognises our differences and the power in those differences.

The Future of African Feminism

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

However, as online feminism spreads, it is also important to remember that millions of women across the continent lack access to ICT services. Thus, online feminism might be an area of deepening inequalities. There is therefore a need to conceptualise other innovative ways to reach these marginalised groups.

Melissa Mazvita Maruta, a passionate young grassroots activist, explains the importance of reshaping narratives around women and youth, and how young women are redefining leadership and activism in Zimbabwean communities.

[13] Extracted from inputs, comments and IdeazBoard contributions from the series of Feminism dialogues held in August 2022

In **Sakubva, Mutare, Zimbabwe**, young women are redefining leadership and activism. Despite daily challenges like overcrowded schools, high unemployment, and restrictive gender norms, they transform obstacles into opportunities. Through grassroots initiatives, they engage parents, teachers, and faith leaders using culturally grounded stories and lived experiences. By fostering dialogue instead of confrontation, they build alliances within churches, schools, and youth clubs. Their advocacy, focused on care and protection, resonates deeply and drives real change.

These young leaders understand that confrontation is not always effective. They intentionally map influence within the community, identifying allies in churches, youth clubs, schools and local committees. By highlighting real-life consequences of teenage pregnancy, early marriage or unsafe reproductive practices, they foster empathy and reflection among elders and authority figures. Advocacy framed as care and protection becomes embedded in the community rather than imposed from outside.

The lessons from Sakubva are profound. Authentic leadership thrives when it is participatory, culturally grounded and inclusive. Young women demonstrate that activism is most effective when it is practical, context-aware and intersectional, addressing age, gender and social realities. Patience, strategy and resilience allow them to navigate backlash and produce lasting change. Collective action amplifies impact, whether through peer mentorship, dialogue or coordinated advocacy campaigns. By engaging often-overlooked influencers - teachers, parents, and faith leaders - these young women expand their reach and deepen their understanding of rights and responsibilities across the community.

The impact extends beyond individual successes. Young women in Sakubva are shaping new narratives about leadership, bodily autonomy and women's rights. They inspire peers, influence community elders and challenge harmful norms, showing that change can originate from within. Even small steps, encouraging a younger girl to speak up in class or helping a friend access health services, build momentum toward broader social transformation.

Maruta says the challenge for the wider community and partners is clear: provide these young leaders with platforms, resources, and recognition, and watch how they transform their communities, resist backlash, and push equality forward. Women and girls in Sakubva are proving that leadership and activism rooted in daily realities can reshape not only their immediate environment but also Zimbabwe's future.

African feminisms represent a dynamic, multifaceted, and context-rooted framework essential for achieving transformative gender justice and social change across the continent. These diverse feminist perspectives honour African women's lived realities, histories, and cultural values while challenging inherited patriarchal norms and harmful traditions. The future of African feminism lies in embracing inclusivity-bridging generational divides, actively involving men as allies, and harnessing both grassroots activism and digital platforms to mobilise collective action.

Policymakers and advocates should meaningfully engage with African feminist knowledge systems and community-driven approaches to craft inclusive, culturally relevant policies that advance gender equality, human rights, and social justice.

In doing so, African feminisms can powerfully reshape narratives and structures, fostering solidarity and sustainable change for women and LGBTQI communities across the continent.