




CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE INTRODUCTION

## Centering Feminists and Feminism in Protests in Africa

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In recent years, struggles for justice, peace, and democracy around the world have been articulated through protests. Whether in Iran, Nigeria, Poland, Senegal, Tunisia, or the United States, this form of political participation challenges the status quo. Rising forms of autocratic rule, democratic backsliding, and right-wing populism underscore the urgency of protesters' demands. Often overlooked in mainstream accounts, however, is the role of feminists in driving forward liberatory demands for new social contracts (Sen and Durano 2014). One recent example of this is the role that the Feminist Coalition played in the Nigerian #EndSARS protests, mobilizing against years of police brutality and impunity (Nwakanma 2022). Confronted with physical harm and even death, these feminists and their fellow protesters have strategized and theorized a vision for a better world (Nazneen and Okech 2021; Tamale 2020).

The goal of this Critical Perspectives symposium is to provide often-excluded accounts of recent protests in Africa. We argue that Africa is an important site of knowledge making and praxis about feminist struggle through protest, historically and contemporaneously. Drawing on a range of experiences from different countries, these essays demonstrate how key moments in the recent past and present of the African continent help us understand the material implications of newer modes of political participation, building social movements, and, ultimately, contestations around achieving justice. The contributors evaluate changes in recent years in their respective contexts and consider the objects and repertoires of protests. These essays demonstrate that there has been a significant and multifaceted shift in feminist organizing from the 1990s to today.

## Unpacking Protests in Africa

Protests have been a vibrant part of politics in Africa. As evidenced by recent edited collections, such as *Gender, Protests, and Political Change in Africa* (Okech 2020) and *Women's Activism in Africa* (Badri and Tripp 2017), protests led by women have been critical to recent social and political change. Many of these protests embody African feminist theories of resistance (Diabate 2020; Dieng 2021; Tamale 2020). But, of course, anyone paying attention knows this is not new. From the protests marking the struggle for independence to those challenging authoritarian rule or agitating for fairer postwar political settlements (Bouilly, Rillon, and Cross 2016; Bouka and Desroziers 2022; Tripp et al. 2008), protest has defined the contours of the modern state system on the continent by pushing the boundaries of the public and the private (see Hassim and Gouws 1998; Tripp et al. 2008; Sow 2021).

As part of a broader global political and economic system that marginalizes women, as well as feminists, the role that feminist ideas have played in mass mobilizations is often absent from outside accounts of political participation in Africa. Concurrently, African cases are often deemed peripheral to broader theorizations of political participation. The reality of recent protests across Africa, however, suggests that the double marginalization of African feminist-informed analysis is no longer tenable.

## Thematic Priorities in African Feminist Protests

The analyses offered in this symposium coalesce around three key themes.

### *Feminists Organize in and against Backlash*

Situated within histories and practices of African feminisms, the contributions in this Critical Perspectives section offer new ways of theorizing protests. Liv Tønnessen and Samia Al-Nagar and demonstrate that, contrary to received wisdom about how gains in gender equality precipitate backlash, this was not the case in Sudan. Rather, in Sudan, backlash against pro-democracy women has been the catalyst of feminist mobilization, aiming to transform the conservative gender ideals subordinating women that were a central element of government repression. Similarly, in countries like Kenya, where the law has been more supportive of gender equality, Awino Okech shows that feminist activists have been able to hold a mirror to illiberal practices and instigate incremental change.

### *Intergenerational Contests within Feminist Movements*

A second theme that appears across these analyses is the significant role of young people in galvanizing recent African feminist activism. Young African feminists in these postcolonial nation-states embrace transnational organizing not to reclaim sameness, but to challenge the practices that inform traditional mediums of political participation, including elections, through protests. In these struggles, young feminists disrupt political orders, privileges, and the

status quo by interrogating patriarchal borders, heterocapitalism, and global geographies of hegemonic masculinity. Protests by young feminists challenge the conservativeness of established entities, such as the mainstream women's rights movement (see the essays by Rama Salla Dieng and by Tønnessen and Al-Nagar), major political parties (Shireen Hassim), and state institutions like the Ministry of Women's Affairs (Rose Ndengue et al.).

### **The Transnational Role of Social Media in Protests**

A third shared element relates to shifts in protest practices ushered in by the emergence and relevance of social media. In the majority of the essays, social media platforms provided visibility for feminist causes, as well as enabled the airing of intergenerational and transnational feminist contestation. Social media allowed young feminists especially to talk back, exposing the stranglehold of patriarchy, not just on society but also within older feminist and women's rights organizations. In the case of South Africa, as Hassim shows, the African National Congress Women's League was instrumental in fighting against apartheid and the transition to democracy, but it has failed to deliver gender justice for younger people. As documented by Dieng, Hassim, and Ndengue and colleagues, the limitations of traditional women's activism, pitting national liberation against feminist (and queer) demands, have made it necessary for young feminists to use innovative repertoires of protest across geographical and digital borders.

### **Feminist Protests in the Twenty-First Century**

The essays that follow illustrate these themes by taking a closer look at feminist protests across a wide range of African cases. Dieng analyzes four decades of feminist protests in Senegal from the radical leftist feminist movement Yewwu Yewwi in the 1980s to more recent large-scale protests following a rape allegation against a prominent politician. Her intersectional analysis of these protests and movements demonstrates the salience of gender, class, and intergenerational entanglements for understanding African feminisms in the *longue durée*. Okech identifies commonalities in feminist organizing for constitutional reform in the 1990s and against gender-based violence in the 2010s in Kenya, raising pointed questions about the fruitfulness of relying on existing legal frameworks to provide justice.

Hassim argues that the 2006 rape trial of President Jacob Zuma revitalized feminist and queer activism in South Africa in the 2010s. These new activisms importantly expose tensions within the traditional women's movement. Tønnessen and Al-Nagar trace the emergence of feminist activism amid backlash from both the state and the regime's opponents in the early 2020s. Despite the shrinking space for emancipatory practices, the Sudanese case demonstrates defiance and resilience in the face of multiple risks. Ndengue and her coauthors situate recent feminist organizing in Cameroon within a transnational context that connects feminists in the diaspora with those in the homeland. These feminists are bound together by their opposition to gendered violence in a

hostile and authoritarian context, to realize actions for change despite significant risks.

As a group, these essays present a snapshot of the processes and impacts of recent feminist protests in Africa, placing them in historical context. They seek to position feminist strategizing as intrinsic to political participation and often incremental change in African politics. Yet, the authors also signal that the contexts within which these protests occur remain unsafe for feminists. For these feminists, then, protests are as much about survival as they are about challenging erasures.

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