

Feminist Advocacy in Africa: Voices and Actions

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Feminist advocacy and particularly African feminist advocacy has not been widely studied and documented. There is need for an exploration and interrogation of what the concept of Feminist Advocacy means in an African context and more broadly to document its rich history. Many feminist and women's rights organisations as well as mainstream organisations use the concept with different explanations of why it is indeed Feminist Advocacy that includes defining approaches or in reference to the identities of organisations. Evidence shows us that advocacy in Africa is largely seen as Northern (Banerjee & Connell 2018), and donor driven (Wilson & Keyserling 2016). However, Southern Feminisms (including African feminism) have been key in stressing the importance of localised advocacy based on the "real needs" of women's communities of the South, evident in the articles in this edition.

There is a need for us to deepen the analysis and thinking around Feminist Advocacy due to its relationship with Feminisms although it manifests and operates in an unequal advocacy ecosystem. Power dynamics within the African advocacy ecosystem depend on systems of inequality that allow for the retention and accrual of power within the system. This poses certain questions – for example, is the trajectory of African feminist advocacy indirectly steered by the North in terms of Feminisms as well as ideas of advocacy? As a result, has it become intellectually orientated to meet theoretical needs of the North? Is the extraversion of intellectual life the result of vertical collaboration between African scholars and their Northern counterparts? Should there be more horizontal discourse among Africans to produce African feminist advocacy theory which responds to the unique needs of Africa? Is Feminist Advocacy something that originates and expands in practice versus being guided by academic scholarship? Is Feminist Advocacy something that deepens and expands in different contexts in the process of implementation?

The impetus for the issue **Feminist Advocacy in Africa: Voices and Actions** is based on learning and understanding generated from the Advocacy Accelerator (AAC). The AAC is an innovative, pan-African platform with a vision to challenge current top-down advocacy structures across the continent. The mission of the AAC is to strengthen advocacy capacity, alignment, and impact in Africa by providing space, online and in-person, for advocates, and the networks that sustain them, to share evidence, approaches, and expertise. It seeks to disrupt traditional models of advocacy work and build an inclusive advocacy ecosystem that values peer-to-peer learning, rigorous research, homegrown knowledge from the African experience, best practices, wisdom sharing, and aptitude development. As an African initiative, we thrive as consciously African and Southern-based, and markedly innovative, working to strengthen vibrant health and development advocacy across the continent. As a Feminist organisation, the AAC operates from a post-colonial, intersectional and intergenerational lens both organisationally and in the implementation of its mandate.

AAC partnered with *Agenda* to produce a journal that reflects on how far we have come in realising Feminist Futures through Feminist Advocacy, and what it will take for us to push forward. This edition places a natural spotlight on reflection on our strategies and tactics as diverse feminist advocates, changemakers and activists. What the process of developing this edition has emphasised is that there is no one clear understanding of or definition of feminist advocacy, and the concept and practice has not been sufficiently theorised: whilst we pay

attention to the **issues** that we address as feminists, we pay less attention to the **practice** of ensuring transformation and an end to patriarchy.

While the AAC has defined advocacy from an African perspective, it has not defined African Feminist Advocacy. This journal has been part of a process of situating meanings in South-based and African terms. As a starting point the AAC sees the term advocacy as referring to all forms of influencing which includes movement-building and campaigning. This view of advocacy goes beyond efforts to influence specific policies. It includes approaches that seek longer-term, more diffused, more transformational change through challenging dominant power relations by augmenting marginalised communities' voices and through reframing debates and seeking shifts in norms (Coe & Schlangen 2019). The AAC includes the impact of colonial and imperial histories and intersecting oppressive systems as part of its feminist advocacy approach. This is reflected in Southern-based theorising of the term.

Advocacy must be based on an analysis of what needs to be changed and why ... this analysis must be feminist because only feminism gives an analysis of patriarchy and how it is linked to the structures and relationships of power between men and women that perpetuate violence, poverty – the crises that confront us (Peggy Antrobus, founder of DAWN in Evans 2005, p.1).

The definition provided which has been in circulation as early as 2003 (see Evans 2003), is one that is continuously used. The difficulty of finding multiple definitions is an indication of the need to deepen understanding as well as the intentional effort to document different views and ideas. This is in line with the notion of the plural of Feminisms versus the singular of Feminism (Lotz 2003; Marine & Lewis 2014).

The endeavour of feminist advocacy is critically important and aptly captured by the feminist organisation Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) for who “the goal is to strengthen African women’s leadership capacities to contribute substantially to new forms of activism, expanding spaces, transforming pedagogies, and projecting alternatives to advance women’s rights in Africa, ultimately contributing to a qualitative difference in the lives of women in Africa” (African Women’s Leadership Institute for Eastern and Southern Africa 2019, p. 9).

Through its work on feminist advocacy, the AAC has explored, challenged and discussed a definition of feminist advocacy as being rooted in feminist principles and philosophy – and both the problems and solutions are seen in addressing, challenging and refashioning power. Kirsty Evans (2005) provides a useful understanding of the concept which works as a good point of departure:

Feminist advocacy is concerned with patriarchy by advancing women’s rights. It has various uses and manifestations, from lobbying strategies at the World Trade Organisation ministerial meetings to the reform of gender-discriminatory policies. Feminist advocacy strategies are targeted to changing key decision-making processes and policies that infringe on women’s rights (Evans 2005, p. 1).

However, we find this definition of advocacy narrow in its focus on decision-making processes and policies which ignores the multiple ways that advocacy takes place. It is also a Northern definition, highlighting the need for expanded study and theorisation on the concept African Feminist Advocacy.

The advocacy ecosystem is unequal in structure, systems, relations and practice. Power dynamics between North and South, advocacy organisations, networks and individuals, and who generates ideas and knowledge and who implements are all elements of a system that allows for unmediated and unquestioned power to reproduce itself. Unless we challenge these power systems, the grounds on which locally driven advocacy finds its roots, language and direction remain largely fallow.

It is within this context that the documentation, discussion and contribution of African feminist advocacy needs to be recognised as important to the challenge and transformation of power hierarchies within the advocacy sector. Therefore, the key purpose of this special issue of the journal is to create space for deepening, interrogation and reflection on the theory and understanding of feminist advocacy, to identify how African feminists themselves define and action feminist advocacy in practice, to explore how feminists and/ or feminist organisations understand the concept/ process of feminist advocacy. As emphasised above, the idea of feminist advocacy is something that is assumed in many spaces with very little scholarship on the topic – it is in our actions and activism as feminists but rarely interrogated as we are so busy challenging patriarchy in all our sites of struggle. Deepening and discussing the concept is critical for knowledge generation and sharing as well as documenting powerful narratives of change.

The contributions in this edition demonstrate that there is a rich tapestry of activism where feminist principles and approaches have been considered across many sectors and issues. Intersectionality and gender transformation has been at the centre with interventions across many levels. This is borne out in the range of issues (violence against women and girls, the gender pay gap, safe abortion, sex work, forced sterilisation, post-conflict reconstruction, women's economic freedom, political quotas) that the authors have written about, across different contexts (from open to closed societies, low to mid-income settings, pre and post COVID) and from different geographical regions and countries (Benin, Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Sudan, Somalia, Kenya and South Africa).

The notion of feminism is now part of the mainstream with the use of the word being used to refer to many different things. The focus on the lived realities of women and girls is seen as feminist advocacy as well as the use of values and approaches that embed feminisms as part of advocacy and change efforts. Either way, the needle has shifted and there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence^{Footnote¹} that feminist advocacy is effective as a tool for change but also for the liberation of the communities using feminist advocacy. This is evident in the “successful” advocacy directed at individual, community and system and norms through changing laws, policies and programmes presented in this journal.

Clear from the onset was that many feminists linked feminist advocacy to the issue that they were working on, that is, working on issues such as abortion, violence against women, the gender pay gap were seen as doing “feminist advocacy”. In this way the process of feminist advocacy – the “how” – was less articulated than the “what”. This required a reframing – to ask authors to shift from the issue itself to how the advocacy around the issue was, in its application, feminist. It also required the editorial team to engage in rigorous discussion and debates on the question if a feminist is doing advocacy on a feminist issue is this feminist advocacy? And who decides what is feminist advocacy? (Wilson & Keyserling 2016).

The Personal is Political

The personal is indeed political, and understandings of feminist advocacy at the personal/political nexus are evident in many pieces in the journal. The focus on the personal as part of feminist advocacy is a direct challenge in a world where there is a focus on disease, population i.e., scientific constructs. Feminist advocacy contributes to structural change as well as fighting for justice and bodily autonomy and this is clearly demonstrated in the rich examples of intersectional feminist advocacy documented in the journal.

In the case study ‘#SAYHISNAME Campaign: Using social media for feminist advocacy’ Tracy Jean-Pierre documents the advocacy journey of Rev. June Major, who was raped by a fellow priest, and her more than decade-long fight for justice. Fuelled by her personal experiences, Rev. June used social media as a key communication tool for her advocacy to conscientise and build solidarity on the issue of rape in the church. The piece highlights the long journey to access justice, by rape survivors, if it is ever achieved. The personal narratives of feminist advocacy highlight the use of the values and principles to guide the paths followed. What is powerful is the feminist alternative approaches to tackle barriers and obstacles that come up at every level. Rev. June’s campaign to name her rapist drew thousands of women on social media who she gave support and courage to, who shared similar experiences of social silencing.

Sethembiso-Promise Mthembu weaves the principles of bodily autonomy and bodily sovereignty into a three decade-long advocacy journey for justice from a State that has a progressive constitution but fails in implementation when it comes to its abuses and violations inflicted on HIV-positive women. In ‘My body, my womb, my rights, my decisions: Feminist’s advocacy to seek justice for HIV positive women who are victims of forced sterilisations in South Africa’ Mthembu narrates some of the challenges and critical interventions made in the quest for justice in victim-led feminist advocacy by the organisation Her Rights Initiative. She also shares the pitfalls, disappointments and the need for feminist solidarity in her advocacy journey, reminding us of the need for courage and determination in victim-centred and -led demands for justice by women and the personal price paid by these women in the face of political impunity.

Again, the personal is a driving force in catalysing feminist advocacy, this time in mentoring and mobilising girls to stand up to and end sexual violence and rape in Zimbabwe. In “*Never again: Not to any woman or girl again*”: Feminist advocacy and the girl child in Betty Makoni’s autobiography’, Mercy Mujakachi and Lindiwe Mulaudzi review the Zimbabwean feminist activist’s life story centring on her organising of a girl child network in Zimbabwe, which in spite of state repression, eventually became an international best practice, with relevance for girl child activists today. The authors write:

In her feminist advocacy model we see reconceptualised and reconstructed female subjectivities and identity positions, different from those imposed by patriarchy. Makoni’s advocacy for girl child empowerment gains traction in Zimbabwe, mentoring many thousands of girls, engaging communities and through lobbying for policy change it expands across several countries and continents” (p. 32).

Bodily autonomy a cornerstone for Feminist Advocacy

Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) continues to be a heavily contested area as it sits at the cusp of women's liberation and control of our bodies. Feminist Advocacy stands out in this area of feminist activism because of the intersecting issues related to women's agency, relationships and structures. The rights of women to choose and make their own decisions are being eroded but a momentous effort to counteract this corrosive trend is reflected in the *profile* in this issue by Mildred Mushunje, 'Unlocking Safe Spaces for Comprehensive SRHR: Advocacy for women's and adolescent girls' right to access safe abortion in Zimbabwe', Mushunje writes that building and strengthening movements in Zimbabwe to change policy and law on the Termination of Pregnancy (ToP) was developed by the voices, participation, decision-making and leadership from the many women who had been affected by the issue. Building the campaign around these voices with support from health practitioners, traditional, leaders and human rights activists and Parliamentarians highlights strategic advocacy goals as well as the role of consciousness-raising among stakeholders as a key principle of feminist organising (hooks 2015). Mushunje writes,

Movement-building in communities is central to sustaining the momentum of the safe abortion agenda and thereby building the traction needed for change. Movement-building can then be escalated to the national level through forming coalitions with women's rights organisations and SRH movements. Clearly, no one organisation can address the ToP agenda on its own. Networks of people, organisations and coalitions brought specific skills to the 'Safe Spaces' movement (p. 49).

Theorising Feminist Advocacy: Context matters

The consistent inequalities and oppression of women in various aspects of their lives is as important to interrogate as the "success" of feminist advocacy in changing the trajectory of women's lived experiences. Premie Naicker argues in her *briefing* 'Turning up the volume on equal pay: Notes toward building a platform for feminist advocacy' there is a need to consistently keep feminist agendas alive and informed to fully address inequalities and to continue advocacy in the creating of an equal pay workplace. She flags actions for broadly based feminist advocacy and the key institutions responsible for tracking illegal workplace practices and gender inequality. Against a review of the armoury of labour and employment equity laws that exist in post-1994 South Africa, she asks: "Can the narrative on women's economic inequality be reframed through a feminist advocacy lens that makes the demand for equal pay a national issue, not just a working women's?" (p. 63) Her question calls for reflection on how frequently women's issues are ghettoised, rather than gaining serious attention as a national responsibility.

Policy-facing advocacy

Feminist Advocacy has a strong focus on legislative, constitutional and legal change. The use of legislative means towards women's liberation tells a story of how women and allies organise to utilise systems of policy-making advocacy. It is clear that feminist advocates are continuously assessing and pivoting to navigate a system that is designed to exclude and keep the rights agenda within the remit of duty bearers and political leaders. The *article* 'Tracking the trajectory of feminist advocacy in Uganda: How has theory informed the practice of advocacy?' by Amon Ashaba Mwiine highlights the fluidity of approach as well as the use of liberal feminism to change laws.

Activists in the Ugandan feminist movement formulated advocacy strategies to resist colonial gender oppression, mobilise women to respond to the review of the constitutional provisions on women's rights, to organise even when confronted with state silencing, and to form critical alliances to meet male resistance to their political representation in Parliament head on, among others, since independence. Feminist advocacy has and continues to occur in a fluid context of burgeoning feminist theory, whether these originate from within or outside the continent (p. 66).

The importance of Mwiine's analytical approach on the theory and context informing feminist advocacy is reinforced by the piece on 'Repositioning African women in politics: from critical mass to critical acts'. Ashleigh Shangare and Cori Wielenga's *article* focuses on the importance of the regional advocacy spaces such as the African Union. It offers a critique of regional gender instruments like the African Union's Gender Policy on quotas and the potential for tokenism. They highlight the different spaces that feminist advocacy takes place, not only within the AU, but also around it. The paper presents a view of the danger of including women without tackling the relations and systems that govern the political environment. If Feminist Advocacy provides a route to tackle the multiple elements of patriarchal power and exclusions in the political sphere through quotas and affirmative action, it also centres the influence women have as critical actors and the driving of feminist agendas in these political spaces. Compliance with quotas or numbers, is seen as a way to maintain the status quo: "Placing women in political institutions of decision-making does not mean sexism within those institutions has been resolved, or that gender equality achieved, even though the goal of gender parity has implied as much" (p. 86). The *article* suggests that feminist advocacy in Africa needs to speak back to and actively review policy formulations that do not go beyond a descriptive understanding of women's political empowerment.

Nontobeko Gcabashe's article on 'Feminist advocacy as part of the agenda for implementing Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development initiatives in Monrovia, Liberia', notes that Liberia's women were largely responsible for ending the country's civil war and instrumental in peacemaking. Her research however shows: "the integration of women to end the multiple injustices, and attempts to stop the unabated reported violence against women in post-conflict in Liberia are barely evident" (p. 99). On paper AU policy mainstreams women as central to peacebuilding and reconstruction deliberations and processes in the post-conflict state, yet without women's rights organisations questioning of the power imbalances at the table, AU policy is not likely to impact on women's ability or willingness to participate.

Intersectionality

Feminist advocacy, as both focus and practice, works across mainstream as well as marginalised and criminalised identities of women. The effective use of the vision of a feminist world, as well as the centring of feminist ways of working, has contributed to gains for marginalised populations. The voice and agency claimed under the rubric of feminisms highlights the importance of intersectionality and challenging systems of power which disenfranchise and silence women across the axis of difference in the margins. Many articulations of advocates and feminist advocacy are from marginalised positions – rape survivor/ victim, women living with HIV who have been forcibly sterilised, and from a vulnerable position of being criminalised, as in the position of sex worker, in all but one country in Africa. Whilst some notable voices are missing, for example LBQ women and women with disabilities, there are lessons to be learned that power from the margins is possible and necessary. This is clearly articulated in the *conversation* "Sex work is

essential(ly) work” – Feminist sex worker rights advocacy in South Africa’. Marlise Richter, Clara Singende and Ishtar Lakhani note that feminist advocacy should be “centred in values of inclusivity and diversity, empowerment, intersectionalism, creativity, and critically – the placing of sex worker needs and voices at the centre of the response” (p. 113). The *conversation* highlights the importance of reflection because change is inevitable. The growth that comes with feminist self-reflexivity or conducting Feminist Advocacy is clear; being open to learning and questioning one’s own power is central to the practice. Replying to Ishtar, Marlise responds: “Ishtar’s contributions make clear that she has consciously subscribed to feminist activism in both the ways she approaches activism (the how) and the subject matter (the why). Her articulation of feminist activism resonated strongly with me, but I never considered my praxis as ‘feminist activism’ in this concrete way” (p. 113). This piece expands our idea of advocacy actions with the inclusion of visual representation/ photos and the creative to get people to rethink social ‘whorephobia’, and prejudice and to adopt an open mind.

On the register of feminist advocacy for policy and law reform, Corey Spengler-Gathercole writes on the complexities of the advocacy push for a change in sex work policy in post-1994 South Africa – highlighting divisions in approach and the end goal of advocacy. Her *article* analyses the public policy engagement and feminist advocacy actions in the Constitutional Court and in Parliament pursued for law reform, decriminalisation on the one hand and partial decriminalisation on the other. Spengler-Gathercole presents ample evidence of the decades of feminist sex work advocacy for decriminalisation by sex worker organisations and coalitions that have done the ground work for progressive law reform and for the legal recognition of sex work as a livelihood. What is not so clear is whether two opposed feminist advocacy positions are flexible enough to seek compromise. The precarity of women and girls doing unrecognised unprotected work in the informal economy continues to be a neglected issue.

The resilience and collective strength of women during times of crisis and disaster when organised is documented in the *article* titled ‘The Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) pathway – feminist solidarity groups leverage COVID-19 to have their voices heard’ by Fatma Zennou, Aisha Rahamatali, Marie Paule Yao and Zenab Bagha. Zennou and colleagues describe how women across West African countries Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria used their small degree of autonomy achieved through membership of savings clubs to assist each other to survive during the pandemic, and then to generate income. With their collective strength and the power of their solidarity they also venture into the public sphere to make collective demands for women and to contest elections:

VSLA women-led solidarity groups became a tool of effective action for expanded leadership and feminist political advocacy. This collective feminist advocacy was motivated by a leadership void created by the pandemic and a lack of policies that actively and effectively safeguarded women (p. 130).

Building generations of feminist advocates

The importance of feminist advocacy learning spaces cannot be underestimated. It is key to supporting advocacy and movement-building and ensuring that approaches become more widespread. This is the fundamental reason that the AAC exists. In 2021, the AAC raised donor funding to implement a two-year programme with young feminists in the East and Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda). The

project aims to build a cohort of young feminists through enhanced feminist advocacy capacity who understand and challenge patriarchy as it affects their lived realities. The goal of the programme was to see visible change at a personal and political level as the young feminists identify oppressions in their context and act on these through advocacy and campaigning.

Young feminists (Helen Owino, Brandy Judith Awuor, Pikyiko Eunice Jacob Francis, Rebecca Karagwa, Esther Mayende, Maryan Khalif, Nancy Cirino, Shyleen Momanyi, Karen Auma Owino, Winnie Wanjiru Ngigi and Nancy Barasa) from this project, share their experiences and understanding in ‘Amplifying the experiences of young feminists conducting advocacy in Africa in the Challenging Patriarchy Programme: The case of South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Kenya’. Their collective understanding of feminist advocacy is the “recognition of the oppression of women and girls’ multiple violations e.g.: violations of bodily integrity, violence against women, access to sexual reproductive health, gender inequality ... and in return building an advocacy that looks at these issues to transform and recreate a society that then enables women to enjoy their full rights” (p. 147).

The experience of young feminists working in hostile environments, in fragile and conflicted states is articulated through personally recounting their advocacy and the many barriers they face, including safety and security due to their context, age, gender – which makes young women vulnerable – as well as a lack of resources and support. Most disturbing is the role that older feminists play in not believing in young feminists’ ability to advocate on their own behalf – this lack of trust is demoralising for young feminists and affects their self-confidence.

Young women are better equipped in offering solutions to problems they face, consequently there is need to ensure increased young women’s participation in decision and policy-making processes at all levels. Governments, development partners and other stakeholders need to create an enabling environment within which young feminists are heard and in which they can operate meaningfully. To ensure inclusivity and that no one is left behind, there is need to facilitate and support the organisation of young feminists to create spaces at local level, and to add their collective voice in the regional and global feminist advocacy fora and organising platforms (p. 153)

Feminist Advocacy practice: Tools, tactics and strategies

The articles in this journal take us some way in theorising the practise of feminist advocacy across the continent. Three key points are evident.

Feminist Advocacy is context based and responds to the environment: Although there are some feminist advocacy tools that are available, they are part of the development economy and as such there are issues with accessibility, use, and general guidance. These tools include the *Oxfam Guide to Feminist Influencing* (Safier et al. 2019). Interestingly, these tools were not mentioned in the articles – but more organic and adapted tools and tactics from an African perspective were clearly articulated.

Feminist Advocacy is about consciousness, solidarity and building coalitions: Embedded in feminist advocacy are concepts such as solidarity and coalition-building and – and these can be at a local, national, pan-African or global level. The global/

transnational level is seen as a critical element for success (Braun & Drieling 2019) – less attention has been paid to solidarity across Africa in advocacy and this is a missing piece of our understanding.

Feminist Advocacy encompasses many different approaches: Feminist advocacy was in many writers’ minds interchangeable with feminist activism, and the same strategies and tactics were employed in both. Crucial to success included a detailed power analysis, consciousness-raising, building solidarity and movement-building in efforts to challenge patriarchy. These elements of advocacy, rooted in feminist organising generally, can lead us to understanding what makes feminist advocacy unique.

The contributions to this journal demonstrate that the feminist advocacy ecosystem is vibrant, organic and multifaceted: whilst it may not be easily defined (both feminist advocacy and the ecosystem/ sector) there are many examples of innovative and effective advocacy challenging patriarchy on different levels. In some ways feminist advocacy is happening outside of the feminist movement (a movement that has its own challenges and issues) – but impact is evident in many of the articles. Further analysis is needed to deepen our understanding of the “what” and the “how” – the learnings are there and we need to find ways to continue the discussions and build the feminist advocacy ecosystem parallel to movement-building.

Notes

¹ Differentiates from what is seen as evidence which is related to data and what makes it into reports about advocacy. Many of the feminist approaches are not captured.

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