

Jul-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Gatwiri, Glory Joy and McLaren, Helen Jaqueline (2016). Discovering my Own African Feminism: Embarking on a Journey to Explore Kenyan Women's Oppression. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(4), 263-273.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss4/18>

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## Discovering my Own African Feminism: Embarking on a Journey to Explore Kenyan Women's Oppression

Glory Gatwiri<sup>1</sup> & Helen Jaqueline McLaren<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

All Black women have experienced living in a society that devalues them. The scholarship of bell hooks submits that the control of Black women ideologically, economically, socially and politically functions perfectly to form a highly discriminative but effective system that is designed to keep them in a submissive and subordinate place. As a Ph.D. student, in a reflective journey with my research supervisor, I engage in a struggle to define my own feminist perspective in as I prepare to explore the oppression, disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Kenyan women living with vaginal fistulas. I examine how poor and socially disadvantaged Kenyan women are forced to lead lives or engage in practices that predispose them to poor sexual and reproductive health. Such practices include child rape, child marriage and female genital mutilation. While academic theorizing considers socio-cultural practices that contribute to women's oppression in Kenya, I seek to locate my position as a Black African feminist to enable my contribution to these debates.

*Keywords:* Oppression, Feminism, Black Feminism, Health, Africa, Vaginal Fistulas, Infibulation, Colonization

### Introduction

I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat... (Rebecca West, 1993, *The Clarion*, Nov. 14).

I commence the exploration of my journey by providing insight into my own developing feminist identity, including my negotiation with language and the meaning of the term 'feminist'. I am a Black, African Feminist in my mid-twenties and in the final phases of completing my PhD. In seeking to understand women's oppression and subordination, my developing feminist identity acknowledges that women have different experiences, contexts, forms and interpretation. My dissatisfaction with some existing forms of feminism has led me to concentrate on the problems faced by other African women from my own country, through my own critical and theoretical sense making. Identifying as a feminist however, is not always easy. As stated by Rebecca West in her quote above, I feel the constant pressure to justify my views from those of the people around me. This is difficult when I am still trying to understand and come to terms with them myself. I

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admit that the more familiar I become with a wide range of feminist theories, the more difficulty I have clearly naming my perspectives and how they align theoretically. Through the various versions of writing my thesis, I have had the opportunity to reflect and refine what being an African feminist means to me. Moving in and between Kenyan and Australian cultures has enriched but also complicated these efforts. Therefore it has been worthwhile to have a prism of feminisms in which to attempt an understanding of a complex phenomenon such as vaginal fistula.

When I moved to Australia as a 21 year old, I was naïve and clueless about how different oppressions intersected, or the extent to which becoming the gendered and racialized ‘other’ would start to play out in my daily existence. In Kenya for instance, I am not constantly reminded of my blackness. However, in Australia I must manage racialized consciousness and the micro-aggressions when met with surprise by Euro-centric others who question who I am, where I came from, how I got to study a PhD, what my life in Australia means and how I have changed as a result. While I struggle to conceptualize all dimensions of subjugation experienced by women in Kenya, in Africa and now Australia, my engagement in Western life and theorizing has helped my appreciation of both Western and non-Western world views informing Black women’s consciousness. I believe I have created an independent, viable, yet liberated knowledge concerning my own subordination. It is an ongoing personal journey of discovering and interpreting how the experiences of Black women are informed and shaped, through my own observations of how race, class and gender intersect. Therefore, the fluidity of my meaning-making necessitates that my feminist understanding and identity constantly change as I take a theoretical journey with formal knowledge and scholarship alongside the narratives of the women participants informing my research. As the paper unfolds, I will demonstrate how naming the multiplicity of my identities and my subjective positions helps to support my own ambivalence and variability.

### **Meandering and Negotiating with Black and African Feminisms**

According to the post-second wave theorizing of Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982), the term feminist had been used to describe women who possess a feminist consciousness. In extension, this may suggest that the term African Feminist can be used to describe anyone who negotiates with and between the ideologies of “Africanness” and Feminism/s. However, Collins (2002) argues that to be a certain kind of feminist, for instance a Black feminist, one must have personal and specialized knowledge that has been created by Black women and that which clarifies a certain standpoint. She wrote, ‘Black feminist thought encompasses the theoretical interpretation of Black women’s reality by those who live and experience it’ (Collins, 2002, p. 2). From such an argument, I understand that lived experience undergirds the form of identity any feminist chooses to embody.

Though I embrace African feminism due to a dissatisfaction with other Black feminist ideologies of the West, I draw my foundations from the Black women’s liberation movement of the 1960s in America because they were among the early advocates of Black women rights. They confronted the dual – and dueling – ideologies of race and gender oppression. I find the continued call of liberation for Black people in America particularly relevant for post-colonial Kenya where similarly, a few minority hold nearly all the power across private and political domains (Kanogo, 2005; Tallis, 2012). My ideas therefore draw significantly on the works of bell hooks, Angela Davis, Maria Stewart and Patricia Collins who continually challenged Black women to ‘reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in their times ... [and to understand] that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women’s poverty’ (Collins 1990, p. 3). I draw from these Black American feminist scholars with some caution of their

Western perspectives, but I also integrate later African feminists' argument (Mikell, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Norwood, 2013) in appreciation of the impact of colonization on the development of gender divisions in Kenya that contribute to women's multiple and intersecting jeopardy.

The theory of multiple intersecting oppressions, domination and discrimination called intersectionality, was first discussed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Thomas (2004) interviewed Crenshaw who insisted that blackness as an experience cannot be conceptualized singly from gender for Black women, but instead as interdependent interactions that reinforce each other. She argued that any scholarship that does not consider the intersectional experiences of Black women cannot accurately represent the true extent in which Black women are subordinated. Patricia Collins (2000) in her 'Black Feminist Thought' arguments promotes the theory of intersectionality to also show how the matrix of social identities of women—whether these be race, class, sexuality, disability, religion or occupation—transect with patriarchal social institutions at multiple levels, thereby causing systemic injustices. As my concern is with Kenyan women, particularly women living with vaginal fistula, I must conceptualize the multiplicity and intensity of oppression that such women are likely to be experiencing with their continual fecal and urinary incontinence. I expect intersectionality will enable interpretation of vaginal fistulas beyond mere descriptions of cause and condition and place them unswervingly as a consequence of patriarchal and socio-cultural factors that are enforced by deeply embedded definitions of constructions of womanhood in Africa.

### **Understanding my African Feminism: Definitions, Identity, and Arguments**

We define and name ourselves publicly as feminists because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognise that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves feminists places us in a clear ideological position. By naming ourselves as feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action. We have multiple and varied identities as African feminists. We are African women – 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" or "howevers." We are Feminists. Full stop.

(Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, 2006, p.4)

In naming ourselves as African feminists, we are claiming 'the right and the space to be feminist and African... [But] we recognize that we do not have a homogenous identity' (Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, 2006; p.7). African feminists pay a close attention to the Continent's past history following colonization, but also the present struggles under neocolonialism, neoliberalism and globalization (Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, 2006; p.4). Although the reclaiming and the building of Africa was equally done by women who fought alongside men, their efforts have been largely unacknowledged (Salo, 2001). Patriarchy has male-washed the significant contributions of women in building the continent in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. In the same token, African feminism is still in a

stage of dynamic theorization and questions about its relevance are continuing to be raised (Makaudze, 2016; Ogunrotimi, 2015). In a way, we are still seeking to understand how similar or dissimilar it is to Western feminism, and why (Coulibaly, 2015). The term 'African feminism' is in itself controversial because it does not encapsulate every African woman's need and can be seen as essentialist. Therefore, the social and economic complexity between the African nations must also be acknowledged. Nevertheless, I discuss African feminism's strategic political relevance for analyzing women's sexual health, particularly issues leading to vaginal fistulas among African women as well as to refer to feminism as it pertains Africa in a broader sense

According to Njoki Wane (2011, p. 7) 'African feminism is part and parcel of African women's lived experiences and about African indigenous ways of knowing...it is about decolonization.' Wane in her article 'African Indigenous Feminist Thought: An Anti-Colonial Project' states that the process of decolonizing the self involves developing reflexivity in which Africans identify politics in Western educational thought which does not speak to or for their experiences (Wane, 2011). Similarly, other scholars such as Filomena Chioma Steady (1987) view African feminism as an epistemology that empowers many African women to understand their gendered status in society, while Nnaemeka (1998;1997) views it as a school of thought that implies their strength and their multiple identities amid the challenges that threaten them. According to the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (2006; p.5), African feminists are also a part of the global movements that aim to dismantle patriarchy in all its manifestations but with a careful understanding that patriarchy 'varies in time and space according to class, race, ethnic, religious and global imperial relationships and structures'. Davies and Graves (1986, p. 8) summed African feminism as a political philosophy that:

Recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation, which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples. It recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. It acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies. It examines African societies for institutions, which are of value to women, rejects those, which work to their detriment, and does not simply import Western women's agendas. Thus, it respects African woman's status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favoring of sons... it respects African woman's self-reliance and the penchant to cooperative work and social organization. It understands the interconnectedness of race, class, and sex oppression.

This is a productive definition of African feminism because it highlights the compounding effects of colonization and women's struggles in Africa. It also acknowledges interaction with Western feminism while simultaneously showcasing African feminism's uniqueness. Davies & Graves show that African feminism is not just about women's issues, but about intersecting socio-cultural, political and economic societal issues that lead to men dominance and women subordination. This means that feminist knowledge (or lack thereof) in all its complexity can create an awareness of how these societal issues affects the lives of people (mostly women) living in



Africa, suggesting ways in which existing power dynamics between men and women can be identified and minimized. Both definitions by Wane (2011) and Davies & Graves (1986), show that there is need for a theoretical approach that is anchored in a 'retrieval, revitalization or restoration of the African senses of Indigenoussness' (Wane, 2011, p. 8). As Wane (2011) suggests, African people need to reposition themselves within their cultural knowledge as a way of understanding their power and collective responsibility in addressing oppressive social issues. Drawing from these scholars, my own definition of African feminism is that it is a school of thought and a mode of discourse that attempts to understand the multiple complexities and challenges presented by sexism – a derivative of patriarchy, poverty and at times colonialization – faced by the African woman. This African feminist approach is one that makes an attempt to educate, empower, and elevate women to a position where they can own their power not against men, but alongside them. However, like Patricia McFadden (2007, p. 36) I do not want to lose perspective of the numerous challenges 'we face as feminists living and working on a continent that has been considered dismissed and overlooked for over a half a millennium of human history'.

African feminism is a complex and difficult scholarly field with which to engage (Wane, 2011, Mekgwe, 2008). Atanga, a Cameroonian African feminist and scholar, asks the question 'Can and does feminism as such exist in Africa? If yes, in what form?' (Atanga, 2013, p. 301). These questions are not new among African scholars, and as Atanga (2013: pg 301) states, some feminists in Africa prefer to be called 'African feminists' rather than just feminists. This complexity is mostly fueled by the confusion of what constitutes Africa. Dosekun (2007) asks whether Africa is a geo-political or a cultural space. Atanga (2013) says that Africa in itself is very diverse and therefore talking about 'African feminism' can also be interpreted to mean 'feminism for Africa' which essentializes Africa by implying that all African women live under the same conditions and face the same problems. Dosekun (2007) adds that feminist scholars should be careful to not treat Africa as a single entity because women of the North ( for instance; Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Libya) face different problems to those in the south of the Sahara such as Kenya, Malawi, Sudan Uganda, Rwanda and others. For example, in her book *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco*, Sadiqi (2003) posits that Moroccan women face problems that relate more to Arab women in the Middle East as opposed to Black women living south of the Sahara. The diversity of Africa and African women's experiences complicates an attempt to formulate and theorize an African feminism.

Interestingly, Kolawole (1997, p. 7) states that African women who accept the label, politics and consciousness of feminism risk being viewed by fellow African scholars as the underdogs for Western ideologies. For this reason, not all African women intellectuals embrace the feminist scholarship due to its associations with radical versions of the Western feminist thought (Arndt, 2002; Dosekun, 2007; Essof, 2001; Gaidzanwa, 2013; Nzegwu, 2012; Mekgwe, 2008). Many reject the colonization of knowledge in which African feminists are discursively positioned as being in need of enlightenment from their Western feminist other. But rather than absolute rejection of the feminisms of the West, I incorporate multiple of their perspectives into my African feminist perspective by exploring their similarities to my advantage in order to strengthen my investigation of the various manifestations of oppression of Kenyan women. Despite some similarities, I argue that there are concerns specific to African women that cannot be adequately theorized with Western feminism. There is a susceptibility of feminisms of the West when used in isolation of other feminisms, to misunderstand or ignore the African women's experience and to conceptualize women from the Global South as being in a state of a second epoch of colonization (Coulibaly, 2015; Soyinka, 1997; Mekgwe, 2008). My African feminist

theoretical framework in solidarity with the global feminist movement conceptualizes the unjust structural, socio-economic and cultural practices that affect African women's wellbeing and experiences in post-colonial Kenya. As such, I see the feminist identity as a strong political indication of resistance to the theoretical and discursive positioning of being submissive and subordinate.

### **On Oppression of Women in Black Africa**

As far as African feminists such as Awa Thiam are concerned, 'there is only one human race that consists of two social classes and two categories of people; men and women, whose relationship to each other is that of dominated and dominating towards each other' (Thiam 1986, p. 13). The exploration of oppression on Kenyan women's health and sexuality, particularly of those who have developed vaginal fistula, requires reflection on some of the most oppressive practices towards women. These include, for example, the Samburu practices of raping girls as young as five years of age by warriors after what is known as the 'beading' process (Nyamache, Matheka, Nyambura, & Waweru, 2013, p. 82). There is also child marriage of pre-pubescent girls with many of these marriages being polygamous; as well, FGM and brutal abortions which are frequently performed on young girls who are not yet married but are sexually servicing the tribal warriors (Amzat & Razum, 2014; Wanyoike, 2011; Nyagweso, 2007). All these practices are tools that aim to control women's sexuality and to 'discipline' their bodies. In her groundbreaking book *Speak up Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, Thiam (1986) also argues that these practices are embedded in a culture of violence from men towards women.

Thiam (1986) argues that it is no longer essential to be a feminist in order to be conscious of the oppression that women in Africa experience. Oppression may take different forms from the most visible burdens to the most subtle. For decades, African women have voiced their concerns and, as a culmination of decades of resistance, much international attention has been given to Kenyan and other African women (Kamau, n.d; Muthuki, 2006; Waithera, 2011). Despite this, the number of girls and women who die under oppressive practices are said to remain quite high (World Bank, 2014). In addition, there are concerns that the prevalence of HIV and AIDS and other diseases among women in Kenya has been higher than national averages in recent times and gender oppression is cited as the underpinning explanation (Lindström, Giske, & Underlid, 2011; Waithera, 2011). While oppressive practices towards women in Kenya have declined overall in the last couple decades, it seems that little has changed in the remote regions of Kenya where women have less access to education and are geographically distanced from much needed medical supports. Seemingly, the efforts that have been made in many African countries to outlaw many oppressive practices towards women, child rape, child marriage and FGM seem to backfire or take effect at an extremely slow pace (28 Too Many, 2013; Mgbako, Saxena, Cave, Shin, & Farjad, 2010). A further look at some forms of oppression Kenyan women face shows that the women who are the main victims of these practices can also be the strongest proponents and the enablers of their own oppression (Patra & Singh, 2015). I suggest this, not to blame women, but to indicate the intensity of patriarchal, structural and institutional power that subsume them.

In a recent analysis of health survey data in Kenya, 92.5% of circumcised women in the North-Eastern regions of Kenya such as Samburu wished for their daughters to be circumcised (Patra & Singh, 2015). Other parents agree to offer their children as sexual slaves to aged men and community warriors (Amzat & Razum, 2014). Women do not resist the enslavement of their daughters due to fear of being marginalized by others in their communities. As such, many women

have therefore been silenced by patriarchy (Kamau, 2013, p. 121). As suggested by Sossou (2002), women's conformity to traditional practices is due to ignorance and lack of alternative discourses that inform their life choices. Therefore alleviating the adversities of Kenyan women needs a critical attack to the institutionalized and systematic domination by men that render these women incapable of understanding their participation in and reinforcement of their own oppression.

### **The Broader Doctoral Research: My African Feminist Contribution**

The main impetus for this research is to understand and dialogue with women who have vaginal fistulas, while probing wider discourses of Kenyan women's gender, health and sexuality. Using the women's collective and individual experiences, I argue elsewhere that their predisposition to fistulas and consequently their lived experiences of fistula are tied to the broader aspects of gender oppression and the construction of the 'African womanhood' (Gatwiri & Fraser, 2015). My research hopes to contribute to feminist understandings of lived experience; how these insights need to inform future practice and knowledge related to the condition. By consulting directly with women affected, I am giving a voice to issues underlined by women who have been 'Othered' and marginalised (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 2; Roberts, 2013). It is my attempt to bring the women who live with vaginal fistulas from the margins to the centre; to hear their subjugated stories and allow them to participate directly in developing a body of knowledge and scholarship of lived experiences relating to being female, Black, African, and diseased. I hope that the knowledge produced in my research will be used to help improve maternal health policies in Kenya and in Africa in general with wider application. My contribution is to elucidate further information on the socio economic and political structures that increase Kenyan women's vulnerability to poor sexual and reproductive health. Currently, I am still finding my feminist identity, in a quest to join the greater fight for dignity and recognition of African women in global dialogues on women rights and freedoms.



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