



Feminist Perspectives on Social Struggles and Resilience in Eastern Africa

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The idea for this special issue arose in 2018 when we met at Makerere University during Zuzana's stay at the university and we had discussions together and with members of the School of Women and Gender Studies and its dean, Sarah Ssali. Our discussions centred on thriving feminist and gender-focused research and the feminist and women's movements in Eastern Africa, which has received a boost from writings by scholars and activists and from the critical media. However, we felt that there have not been enough opportunities for mutual discussions to take place between African and European feminist researchers and not enough open access fora to publish in. Not that many authors from Eastern Africa are well known in Europe outside the field of African Studies. Moreover, we agreed that the scattered information available about the lives of women from Eastern Africa is often overshadowed by numerous stereotypes and the overall issue of poverty, despite the highly varied research that has been carried out in this region. That was when we came up with the idea of dedicating a special issue of the journal *Gender and Research* to feminist research in Eastern Africa. Here we would like to thank Dean Sarah Ssali for her support and contribution at the beginning of this editorial project.

Though research on feminism and gender in Eastern Africa has been going on for over three decades since the feminist and women's movements began to be very robust, we observed that to access research reports and literature still remains difficult for researchers. The School of Women and Gender Studies, which was founded in 1991,¹

¹ More information is available from the website of the School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, Kampala: <https://womenstudies.mak.ac.ug>.



has been at the forefront of feminist scholarship and gender research in the region. Makerere University and other universities in the region continue to produce rich research and knowledge in this area. There are also numerous non-governmental organisations that do a lot of research on gender issues. However, all this information remains scattered and available mainly within the different institutions that do these researches. On the other hand, the numerous collaborative ties between central Europe and Eastern Africa were disrupted after the disintegration of the former Eastern bloc in the early 1990s. Our conclusion was that there is an urgent need to build bridges and create more spaces for discussions between European and African feminist research institutions and platforms for the exchange of knowledge about what goes on in the lives of women within the region and within Africa as a whole, which would present a more complex picture without the a priori framing of poverty and underdevelopment. Feminism in Africa is diverse and rich and is constantly evolving.² It is contextual, historical, and to different degrees influenced by political, economic, religious, cultural, and global trends. The articles in this special issue take Eastern Africa as their vantage point, but the issues that are addressed here have a more general relevance.

This special issue presents feminist perspectives on *Struggles, Memory and Resilience in Eastern Africa*. It contains articles by feminist scholars discussing different angles on agency and demonstrating women's resilience in the context of the challenges that women continue to face, such as patriarchy, gender oppression, exploitation, poverty, and discrimination. It focuses on the everyday struggles of women in Eastern Africa and the social practices of reconciling historical injustice and memories in an effort to reconstruct the future of Eastern Africa, and this sheds light on the active strategies and resilience of women's and local collectivities and the ways they have been overcoming obstacles and struggling for justice. These are just a handful of the stories that inform what women from the region are doing to better their lives.

The Eastern Africa region in the context of this special issue was remapped to go beyond today's East African Community (EAC, comprising Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan) and the historically designated colonial geographical mappings of East Africa. We understand the context of Eastern Africa as extending the EAC to the IGAD region (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), sometimes referred to as the Greater Horn of Africa (comprising Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya). Calls were sent for articles that speak to this theme and we received an overwhelming response, but only a few could make it into publication. Most certainly, the issue does not represent the whole region.

² See, for example, <https://africanfeminism.com/>.

We thank all those who responded to the call and we express our special gratitude to the published authors.

This issue highlights the mutual relationship between social structures and agency and exposes how hard women from the Eastern African region continue to work to better their living conditions and contribute to the development of their immediate families and societies. The articles exemplify what Gwendolyn Mikell (1997) described in her book as the nature of African feminisms. Mikell argues that African feminism is about everything – the bread, the butter, and power, and about how these things impact the lives of African women. It is not only about political participation and leadership. African feminism is varied and includes issues of mothering, gender relations, sisterhood, land ownership, farming, trade, peacekeeping, education, and how all these build the lives of girls and women in relation to the men in their lives to make life better for all. 'The African variant of feminism grows out of a history of female integration within largely corporate and agrarian based societies with strong cultural heritages that have experienced traumatic colonisation by the west.' (Mikell 1997: 4) Women from Eastern Africa have actively participated in all these endeavours, individually and in groups, to challenge patriarchy, oppression, and underdevelopment.

To present a more complex picture of women's struggles in contrast to a simplified 'poverty story', we invited photo-journalist Sumy Sadurni to put together several visual stories. Her photo reportage presents Ugandan youth engaging in a global environmental movement, women's street protests in Kampala against violence against women and gender-based violence, a women's collective in Eastern Uganda that works to eliminate the practice of female circumcision, which persists in some communities despite being outlawed a decade ago, and a local women's group in South Sudan carrying out community work for peace among their communities. Last but not least, she also documents the most recent challenge of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed people's everyday lives around the world.

Women in the region have shown remarkable resilience in challenging gender inequality. Women have been struggling to gain the same rights and respect as men and the situation of women's rights has greatly improved in the region as a whole. Women have been always active in creating communities' resilience, but these stories have barely been written about. The absence of African women's historiographies has been attributed to several factors, one of which is that there were no African women historians to write women into history. This was perhaps also influenced by what appears to be a lack of urgency about the need to write about such experiences, because until recently all knowledge was passed on orally by word of mouth and women were the custodians of such knowledge and folklore. To a large extent, therefore, most of the history of African women and their experiences remains lost



and buried with the matriarchs who couldn't record such stories for posterity in forms other than oral. Amandina Lihamba, Fulata L. Moyo, Mugaybuso M. Mulokozi, Naomi L. Shitemi, and Sad'da Yahya-Othman (2007) confirm that in the written history of Eastern Africa there are many male heroes, warlords, while very little has been written about female heroines.

It is against this background that Adima Anna's article 'The Sound of Silence: The 1929-30 Kikuyu "Female Circumcision Controversy" and the Discursive Suppression of African Women's Voices' should be read. The silence about the 1929-1930 female circumcision controversy between the male elite of Kenya, missionaries, and colonialists is interpreted by Adima as evidence of the suppression of women's history, and in this case the suppression of their views about female circumcision, a practice that concerned women directly. Through archival research, Adima discovers that most of the literature informing scholarship about Kikuyu women and female circumcision was actually written by men. Jomo Kenyatta's autobiography, *Facing Mt Kenya* (Kenyatta 1968), which the author uses as a point of reference, presented a male perspective on the problem of female circumcision. Just as female circumcision sought to subdue women sexually and bend them to men's will, the silence surrounding the practice and the lack of scholarship by African women on the matter makes such historiographies remain suspect. The scholars who wrote about the female circumcision controversy were either Kikuyu men, the non-Kikuyu elite, white missionaries, or colonial masters (Shorter 1974). They were biased by their different positionalities and they never represented the voices of the Kikuyu women. Such findings show the importance of archival research in exposing how women's voices and experiences were silenced by colonialism. Archival research remains significant in exposing the one-sided, male-centred production of colonised and masculinised knowledge about women's experiences.

The nationalist struggles that took place in the post-independence period in the Eastern Africa region continue to be presented in a gender-blind manner but perhaps even more so from a patriarchal perspective. Men emerged as leaders after countries gained independence and wrote themselves into history. However, women began to claim their spaces, too. This had a lot to do with global movements that influenced feminist and women's movements in Africa. The UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), for example, opened up opportunities for women to participate in politics, as did several other conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the UN Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW, 1993), and later the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). At the regional level, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women meeting held in 1985 helped to bring women together to build consensus on how

to fight gender discrimination and oppression. Most if not all the countries in the Eastern African region have amended their constitutions to be gender-sensitive and responsive. This combined with the support of national and regional bodies has had positive effects.

The African Union, for example, has been instrumental in mainstreaming gender in all its endeavours. In 1998 the African Commission on Human and People's Rights was established. In 1999 the African Union appointed a special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa. In 2000 the Directorate of Women, Gender and Development was also established by the African Union. These gender-responsive institutional mechanisms have been instrumental in the promotion of women's rights in Africa. Likewise, regional bodies such as the East African Community have also pledged to adhere to these gender-responsive protocols that aim to promote women's and human rights.

In terms of education, the UNESCO report in 2010 shows that women are obtaining increasing gender parity in education at tertiary institutions within the Eastern Africa region, much more so than in other African regions. However, despite the UNESCO 2010 statistics, the Gender Development Index (GDI) for Uganda in 2018 still shows that there is a need to fight gender inequalities in the achievement of the three basic dimensions of human development, i.e. health, education, and economic development, because without improvement in any of the three, there can be no real development (cf. UNDP 2016, 2019).

However, must development be measured in economic terms or should the critical focus be put on human development as well? In the article 'Revisiting Economic Empowerment as a Sufficient Remedy for Gender Based Violence: The Case of Jinja District in Uganda', Catherine Pauline Anena and Solava Ibrahim argue that economic empowerment without fighting gender-based violence in its complexity cannot lead to women's empowerment. Women's command over economic resources must be measured against the overall understanding of the broader concept of empowerment, which must go beyond economic empowerment. Empowerment comes when women have control over their lives and reproduction and over production and resources – and when there is no gender-based violence or violence against women. In their research, Anena and Ibrahim show that the emphasis on women's economic empowerment as the sole strategy applied to empower women, which is favoured by many international agencies and policy programmes, is flawed because women who are economically independent still face different challenges linked to fighting patriarchy and gender-based violence in their homes and institutional social context.

On the same theme of economic empowerment, Zoë Johnson's article 'Young Women and Feminised Work: Complicating Narratives of Empowerment through Entrepreneurship with the Stories of Coffeehouse Owners in Wukro, Ethiopia' also



complicates the narrative about economic empowerment. This article brings in young women, who were not recognised in the earlier African women's movement. It questions the absence of young women from feminist discussions and repositions female Ethiopian youth at the centre of the debate, analysing how they are contributing to the empowerment of their families and communities. Johnson argues, and rightly so, that most of the scholarship about young women depoliticises these young women's roles and robs them of their agency by homogenising their visions and aspirations. The young women who sell coffee in the *bunabéts* – the small coffee shops found on the streets of Ethiopia – are not recognised as entrepreneurs, and yet they do a lot of entrepreneur work that brings them and their families income. By interviewing these young women, Johnson concluded that the young women of Wukro could not be ignored because they were making a significant impact on the economy. She concludes that these women should be recognised as agents of economic change.

Ruth Nsibirano, Consolata Kabonesa, Evelyne Lutwama-Rukundo, and Euzobia Baine-Mugisha, on the other hand, explore the element of ageism and in particular how ageing and older women are beating the odds of trading in Kampala city markets. Market women, and particularly West African market women, are known throughout Africa for their resilience. In their article 'Economic Struggles, Resilience and Agency: Ageing Market Women Redefining "Old" in Kampala, Uganda', the authors describe the complexity of gender, ageism, and work. The Kampala market women have learnt to enjoy their trading activities, made friends, and earned enough money to support themselves and their families. The debate on gender and ageism has long emphasised the diminished opportunities that exist for ageing women because of patriarchal norms that prioritise women's appearance (Garner 1999). However, the Garner idea does not represent the complete reality of ageism, and the meaning of age and esteem that are reflected in the stories of the Kampala market women that Nsibirano et al. interviewed. Age is seen to be accompanied by some physical disadvantages, but it also brings wisdom. Although in terms of gender, folk wisdom more often presents old men as the wise sages, while old women are not shown equal reverence (e.g. Mineke Schipper 1991), the debate about the social esteem of women as they age remain contestable and contextual. With the hardship of urban life, older women in Kampala have defied the negative expectations that society has of women their age and are actively rebuilding their lives by selling food in the markets. This has helped them to reclaim their agency and earn money to support themselves, thus reducing their social and economic dependency. However, a remaining challenge may be that as older women maintain their economic independence, the burden of work on them grows.

The thematic issue also includes book reviews that speak to our theme. Maria

Grace Kentaro reviews Victoria Flavia Namuggala's book *Childhood, Youth Identity, and Violence in Formerly Displaced Communities in Uganda* from 2018. The history of resilience during and in the aftermath of the conflict between the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) and the Government of Uganda that took place in Eastern and Northern Uganda are clearly articulated in the review. Katharina Hoffmann reviews the book on transitional justice in post-conflict contexts from 2019 edited by Rita Shackel and Lucy Fiske. Hoffmann highlights the chapters on Somalia and Kenya and the book's important contribution to the argument for the need to include critical considerations of gender structural injustice in debates on transformative justice and to reconstruct future just arrangements so that they are embedded in local experiences and knowledge. Last but not least, Zuzana Uhde reviews Albert Kasanda's book *Contemporary African Social and Political Philosophy* published in 2018. The review points out the rich knowledge that has been produced in social and political thinking in Africa and that extends beyond postcolonial critique and ethnophilosophy, thus defying another aspect of the distorted representation of social movements and knowledge produced in Africa.

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