

Gender-based Violence in Africa – A Position

The following pages can only be described as an attempt on providing a glimpse of an insight into the vastness that is - today - defined as Gender-based Violence (GBV) and its impacts on the African landscape. The sheer size of the terrain reflects the fact that GBV seems to be a rather resilient and destructive, yet largely hidden social activity, that is firmly rooted in the existence and prevalence of patriarchal relationships of power at every level of human interaction within the historically often male-dominated societies around the globe.

As such GBV expresses itself, and is further perpetuated, in a variety of ways and through the various channels in patriarchal societies, so that its subtle entrenchment in cultural/traditional and societal attitudes, norms and behaviours, re-moulds all knowledge surrounding non-violent ways of relating between genders. It would be possible to suggest that such reshaping happens to the point where the occurrence of GBV, whether in its more crude forms (violent homophobia¹, gang rape², domestic abuse³) or in its more structural expressions (polygamy⁴, lobola/bride price⁵, FGC/ Male circumcision⁶), becomes an accepted 'norm' of life, and part and parcel of how societies perceive and recognize themselves.

This ideological introduction is not intended to simplify the topic, but to point to the complexities of seeking to understand and analyse a phenomenon on the continent that may be directly observable, quantifiable, explainable and attributable depending on how far the definitions reach, yet whose root causes and underlying principles are deeply embedded in the continent's history and the very way the systems and institutions of belief, governance, production and trade, communication, and security were and are still designed and implemented. This is evidenced by the, today still, heavily male-populated and -dominated security sectors⁷, the mainly-male leadership of tertiary education⁸⁻¹⁶ and political sectors¹⁷⁻²², the still largely male finance and trade²³⁻²⁵, construction and manufacturing²⁶⁻²⁸ sectors across the continent.

The combination of traditional/customary patriarchy with the imposed colonial and post-colonial forms of patriarchy essentially finds itself expressed in innumerable gender-discriminatory state structures and services, social customs, practices and beliefs and random acts of gender-specific violence across the continent. It would hence be possible to argue that in their culmination, the practices translate into the continuity of patriarchal systems dependent on various levels (-or dimensions) of GBV throughout the continent.²⁹⁻³²

Although it must be noted that there are theories (such as Roy Porter's on the history of rape in England³³) which suggest that far from being central to patriarchal practice, GBV is marginal and practised by those largely excluded from the central sites of patriarchal power (young men, men in armies as 'footsoldiers', men on the margins of social and political power), it is difficult to translate these into an analysis of GBV in contemporary African contexts, given its highly proliferated presence in the lived realities of countless individuals across the continent and globe.

Hence accepting the theory of GBV as having different levels and shapes, these can be argued to encompass the whole of society, from the most '*public*' of spheres to the most '*private*'. They furthermore range from '*macro*' mechanisms - such as the gearing of state services, support and resources towards particular groups (i.e. men) while directly or indirectly excluding others from access to those³⁴⁻³⁸ - to more '*micro-level*' - and often culturally grounded - mechanisms, such as FGC, domestic abuse/wife battery, early marriage of girl children etc.³⁹⁻⁴² Another dimension to be added include those seemingly "*random*" acts of gender-based violence, such as stranger rape, curative rape of lesbians, gay-bashing, sexual harassment, forms of social policing such as constant unwanted sexual attention towards particular femininities, homophobic hate speech etc.⁴³⁻⁴⁶

Initially appearing somewhat unconnected in terms of the environments, identities of perpetrators, and rationalizations for different forms of attack, together these various levels of more or less visible GBV can be argued to be the "*glue*" that allows patriarchy to wield multiple levels of power. Hence, GBV - or the fear thereof - becomes one of the key

ideological and physical mechanisms by which a patriarchal hierarchy maintains itself and subsequently relegates women to socially constructed subordinate statuses.

Looking at GBV like this, the feeling arises that GBV may not so much be an *'outgrowth'* of particular types of societies that has to be treated through particular *'remedies'*, but constitutes the very fibre out of which these societies are woven and as such demands change to the way social relations of gender are perceived and constructed in first place.

One of the underlying frameworks through which patriarchy reproduces itself has been coined *'heteronormativity'*. Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl define heteronormativity as:

...the [i]nstitutionalisation of exclusive heterosexuality in society. Based on the assumption that there are only two sexes and that each has predetermined gender roles, it pervades all social attitudes, but is particularly visible in *'family'* and *'kinship'* ideologies.

Heteronormativity constructs oppositional binaries – for example, man/woman, homosexual/heterosexual - and is embedded in discourses which create punitive roles for non-conformity to hegemonic norms of heterosexual identity⁴⁷

Differently put in the same volume by Marc Epprecht, a longstanding Southern African masculinity scholar, "...[e]xclusive, lifelong heterosexuality is not a natural condition but has to be carefully cultivated and recreated as a hegemonic ideology in the face of changing material circumstances and in relation to multiple marginal identities and practices."⁴⁸

How hegemonic this ideology can become if left unchecked is best demonstrated when looking at language. In particular the language employed in - what appear as neutrally formulated and well-intentioned, yet are very powerful - conventions, protocols or laws designed within patriarchal systems. To quote a definition from the 1979 UN 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Gender-based Violence is:

...any act...that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in private or public life...violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, the community, including battery, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women [my own emphasis], non-spousal violence, violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, and violence against women perpetrated and condoned by the state... ⁴⁹

Since, the debate has definitely swung towards recognizing women's agency within these *'harmful traditional practices'*, such as FGM/FGC, to recognize not only their degree of influence in shaping these practices but to also leapfrog the African woman = victim debate.

This debate has been shown to overly focus on investigating African women's victimhood - rather than their agency - by mostly paying attention to what was/is happening to *'African women'* rather than how Africa's women, with their individual positionalities and as constantly engaged in complex status negotiations within their multi-fold communal affiliations, are resisting or benefitting from GBV within their various roles. Such a debate however, was only made possible by the homogenizing attitudes towards Africa found in early – and not so early - developmental and neoliberal literature, whose underlying logic is that of manipulable markets and consumers subject to the rational laws of the economic science, rather than irrational economic agents embedded in and dependent on vast and complex social systems. In effect, this type of thinking has in the past contributed to perpetuating and deepening gender stereotypes and myths of women as passive recipients of violence rather than actors in their own right, thereby setting the scene for much of the *'women-failing-development'* that can be witnessed across the globe and the continent.⁵⁰⁻⁵⁸

The CEDAW quote above shall furthermore serve as a reminder of how seemingly neutral

institutions and social conventions can become carriers of patriarchal attitudes if left unchecked. The simple assumption that body modifications associated with gender-specific initiation rites imposed only on females within patriarchal contexts are per se examples of GBV - as expressed by choosing to label it as a '*mutilation*' rather than a '*modification*', whereas a labelling along the same sentiments may not be afforded to male circumcision - is a prima facie example of how female agency within a patriarchy is systematically defined to only exist in relation to men and as such rules out female autonomy from the very starting point. This is not to say that women in societies that adhere to such customs have not adopted, adapted or redefined these and have hence even strengthened their autonomy, agency and social standing within such contexts, but merely to point to the depth with which patriarchal attitudes construct social life and its customs, traditions and practices.⁵⁹⁻⁶¹

In keeping with these sentiments, it is important to also pay attention to language surrounding GBV-activism and academia. Therein, one encounters a more recent linguistic distinction between GBV and VAW/VAC, presumably an attempt to distinguish and catalogue the various manifestations of violence more accurately. Although these terms are often being used interchangeably, they do carry differences in meaning and as such should be used carefully to not further entrench stereotypical notions of women as only victims. GBV thereby addresses all forms of violence based on gendered assumptions, irrespective of the sex or gender of the perpetrator or the survivor/victim, and VAW explicitly addresses the particular types of violence women and girl-children are exposed to on the basis of their sex and the inherently inferiorizing gendered assumptions surrounding their belonging to the female sex.

VAC or Violence Against Children in turn is used to denote the particular risks that children in general are exposed to, again irrespective of their sex.⁶²⁻⁶⁴

The issue of language when addressing GBV (often Northern/academic) then furthermore links to issues surrounding the copyright of that particular language (often Northern-held) and hence the access to knowledge (Northern-biased). The reality in many Southern contexts is that Northern resources are inaccessible due to lack of access to financial resources and the relative irrelevance of much of the Northern writings to Southern/local contexts, which in turn can be described as a knowledge gap. A further dimension to this is the wide gap between Northern-directed knowledge building surrounding GBV and the way this is actually implemented within the Southern hemisphere. This problem is in turn exacerbated by the lack of holistic, cross-disciplinary research with a GBV focus that talks to each other.

For example, Jane Bennett, in having written a review on GBV research in South Africa notes, that "...*despite the obvious implications that research in one area (say, development) might have for another (say, GBV), there was little resonant, dynamic conversation between researchers working primarily in one field and researchers working in another.*"⁶⁵ Although she notes that there are '*multiple research zones*', such as poverty, HIV/Aids, social movements, sexualities, transition politics, conflict and militarisation studies as well as tourism and globalisation in which '*critical insights*' relevant to gender dynamics and GBV are offered⁶⁶. Bennett also bemoans that "...[t]he consistent anti-feminism, downgrading of the importance of gendered processes, and identification of GBV as anecdotal to other concerns, becomes sandpaper, after a while, to the eyes' skin."⁶⁷

Despite the advances of four World Conferences on Women (Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, Beijing 1995); the existence of CEDAW, which was adopted by the UN in 1979; the setting up of Gender Equality Commissions in various countries and the increasing mobilization of women activists throughout the South through ICT-technologies; the knowledge gap between North and South remains and seems to widen in particularly capital-intensive knowledge industries, such as the academia.⁶⁸⁻⁷¹

Although considerable efforts have been undertaken in giving - often still Northern-led - GBV-support, -elimination and -prevention programmes an African face during the 1990's and 2000's up to today (for example ACORD's change from a "*Northern consortium into an Africa-Led International Alliance*"⁷² between 2002 and 2006 and its subsequent move to

Nairobi, Kenya; ISIS-Wicce's relocation to Kampala, Uganda from Geneva, Switzerland at the end of 1993⁷³), much mainstream work on GBV has only recently begun to engage the root causes of GBV. An example would be the work done around changing destructive notions of masculinities as a means of preventing GBV, thereby addressing underlying structural inequalities within the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of nations across the continent (for example the African Women's Development and Communication Network's (FEMNET's) "*Men to Men Project: Men against Gender-Based Violence Regional Network*"⁷⁴ initiated in 2001).

The point is thereby not the existence of these, what need to be more or less described as, intervention/prevention '*trends*', for they often only highlight the deeply contextual and complicated aspects surrounding a true eradication of GBV in societies and are often the only relief for many survivors of GBV and sexual violence. The point is to highlight the absence of programs aimed at eradicating the underlying conditions that give rise to the phenomenon of GBV. Put differently, in order to tackle a phenomenon that is so deeply entrenched on various levels and in various forms within the very understanding of (particular) societies, more holistic approaches that not only address the more visible aspects of GBV and seek to re-integrate survivors into the '*conventional*' economies and social systems ought to be developed - but more pro-active approaches. Approaches, that aim at addressing the underlying livelihood dependencies created by the largely privatised, increasingly globalized and environmentally destructive economies of '*modern*' nations, and which are furthermore built on patriarchal, and hence gender discriminatory and GBV-encouraging, power relationships.⁷⁵⁻⁷⁹

With one eye on the power politics surrounding the sphere of knowledge (spell: Who has access how and to what knowledge from where, which in turn was designed to benefit who exactly?) and hence empowered with a healthy scepticism towards readily available and accessible information from various platforms concerning GBV offered by our mostly economy-driven, '*globalised*' and media-directed societies, it must be noted that any engagement of the available African-based and -authored teaching resources on Gender-based Violence quickly turns into an interesting exercise in locating Northern agendas behind Southern faces in order to identify the relevant material. To make it worse, in a critical arena such as GBV where changes to policy have the potential to improve the lives of millions of survivors of such violence, the line between what is Northern agenda and Southern effort, and whether and where they actually combine for the better, is often further blurred through myriads of offshoot-organizations all carrying their own emphases and visions on how to best approach the various manifestations of GBV in their own way.

This is not to say that these organizations are not doing vital humanitarian work that is so desperately needed; but to merely suggest that the agenda-fragmentation, funding-dependencies and over-specialization of the (not exclusively) Northern-funded, Southern GBV-activism movement may in the long run turn out to be counter-productive to rooting out a phenomenon that has evolved over centuries, with a deep-reaching and powerful social grounding and advanced tools (law, cultural notions, traditions, norms, codes and values) for its enforcement. So, and without trying to step on toes, I must remark that the majority of approaches to GBV on the continent at times feel like a random treatment of symptoms for which the cause is unknown - somewhat like misdiagnosing HIV/Aids as a '*flu*' and prescribing the hopelessly ineffective remedy to deal with the symptoms.

This argument may seem to be farfetched at first, but it quickly solidifies and becomes important the more one engages with GBV initiatives - ranging from grass-roots to internationally-commissioned - across the continent, whose research, documentaries and general publishing, writing, networking and activism forms much of the backbone of '*indigenous*' GBV knowledge, but whose dependability on (often short-term) foreign funding in order to create deep-reaching and long-lasting transformative action, often belies their efforts. Furthermore, it is this disjuncture - between the type of community empowering and sustainable action needed to challenge and re-construct the deeply entrenched gender inequalities responsible for much of the Gender-based Violence witnessed across the continent and the '*quick results*' orientated mindset of the often still male-dominated or at least hierarchical entities '*developing*' Africa - that is as responsible for the continuity of gender inequality as colonialism was for its exacerbation. To clarify quickly, this is not to accuse Northern donors outright, but merely to point to the - what I

perceive as – artificially created livelihood dependencies of Southern populations on the whims and woes of an increasingly speculative and hence fragile, neo-liberalist and Northern-based financial regime.

Although this point was at first more of a suspicion while reviewing the literature, the suspicion became stronger after engaging with the two publications entitled “*Where is the money for Women’s Rights?*”⁸⁰ from 2005 and “*The Second Fundher Report: Financial Sustainability for Women’s Movements Worldwide*”⁸¹ resulting from a multi-year research project on funding for GBV activism by the ‘Northern’-funded Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). It was then confirmed after reading the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) study “*Where is the money to address gender-based violence?*”⁸² published in November 2007, which echoes and supplements the argument made by AWID with South African data. The shared sentiments here were that “[w]orldwide funds have tended to decrease for gender-specific initiatives over the past ten years”.⁸³ This trend is suggested to partly have been caused by “*the corporatisation of some donor-agencies according to neo-liberal capitalist agendas and the increasing marginalisation of women’s rights in a political environment characterised by religious fundamentalism, militarism and global capitalism*” and partly by the shift to ‘mainstreaming’ approaches in the field of gender.⁸⁴

In particular GBV-programmes are affected and hence the decreased funding presents the challenge of undoing many of the gains achieved over the past decades in combating GBV. The effect of the decreased funding is then compounded by often very strict and ever changing organizational accountability requirements set by the donors – often too strict and complicated for many small, community-based programmes. As a result many organizations working in the field of GBV have recorded a decline in programmes focussing on “*...victim empowerment, counselling services, shelters and the delivery of other welfare services.*”⁸⁵

The question of availability of funding for current GBV-initiatives can thereby be directly traced back to the history of GBV activism on the continent. Whereas GBV-activism during the 1970’s and 80’s on the African continent was inherently tied to women’s activism surrounding nation-building in the wake of the African nationalist movements⁸⁶⁻⁸⁹, the 1990’s have witnessed “*...increasing pressure from women’s nongovernmental organizations to institute legislation against gender-based violence in such areas as rape, wife battering and sexual harassment. [...] One of the accomplishments of this advocacy process has been...[the recognition of]...gender-based violence as an instrument of genocide and a crime against humanity...*”⁹⁰ This process has - over the past decade or so – been mainstreamed and inserted into rights-based approaches to development in an apparent attempt to strengthen international support for GBV-programmes. On the one hand, this promises more attention to GBV within the development discourse, but on the other hand also has considerable drawbacks, as for example Dzodzi Tsikata points out. She thereby argues, that the recent development approaches – as for example expressed through the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) programmes or the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP’s) – are essentially “*...liberalisation programmes with poverty alleviation added on...*” and as such continue “*...to push for the privatisation of essential services such as water and national banks in several African countries...[hence]... rejecting arguments based on decades of experience that these policies would further impoverish poor households and their members.*”⁹¹

Nevertheless, the rights-based approach in development and to development has effectively opened the door for a powerful stream of legal feminist activism⁹²⁻⁹⁴, which has since resulted in a variety of international, regional and sub-regional policy instruments centred around the core themes that have emerged from gender-based violence research done on the continent, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, traditional practices defined as violence, and the role of the state in relation to violence.⁹⁵

Other accomplishments include, but are not exclusive to, the following rights-based tools⁹⁶:

UN instruments:

- CEDAW – 1979
- General Recommendation 19 (11th session) 1992
- Declaration on the Elimination of violence against Women – Res. 48/104 - 20th Dec. '93
- UN Trafficking Protocol - "*Protocol to prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the UN convention against Transnational Organised Crime*" - (2000, Palermo, Italy)
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Fourth World conference on women - 15th Sept. 1995
- UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (31st October 2000)
- UN General Assembly Resolution (Intensification Res.) - 81st session - 19th Dec. 06

Regional Instruments:

- AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' rights on the rights of Women in Africa - 11th July 2003, Maputo
- AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa - 6th-8th July 2004, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Sub-regional Instruments:

- SADC Declaration on Gender and Development – signed 8th Sept. 1997 in Blantyre, Malawi
- Addendum to SADC declaration – '*The Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Children*' – SADC conference on Prevention of VAW in Durban 5-8th March 1998 – signed 14th Sept. 1998
- ECOWAS Trafficking Declaration (Dakar declaration) – signed 20th - 21st December 2001 in Dakar
- SADC Protocol on Gender and Development – signed August 2008 [click here](#)

Given the humble beginnings of what today comprises the field of GBV-focused studies with all its achievements, one needs to pause for a second and reminisce the generations of activists, academics, businesswomen, and men, writers, thinkers, poets, doctors, lawyers, workwomen –and men, everyday women and men and people with voices non-audible only to their oppressors, who have all contributed to give this thing - so simplistically labelled '*Gender-based Violence*' in the modern discourse - a face.⁹⁷⁻¹⁰⁴ Their stories and struggles serve as a constant reminder of what has been lost and what gained; and they shall serve as the yardstick by which future generations will have to measure their humanity.

What needs to hence be acknowledged is the enormous paradigm shift achieved through the relentless efforts of said pioneer-esses, which has resulted in giving a voice and language to the millions – if not billions - of survivors of GBV. The ideas of '*female bodily autonomy*', '*women's rights*' or '*gender equality and –equity*' are very recent ones and as such continue to be challenged and threatened across the globe. Not too long ago, the bodies of women were regarded as de jure and de facto property of men – a notion justified through powerful cultural discourses and practices that effectively reduced woman to their reproductive capabilities in the public eye and hence sought to restrict their agency to the domestic sphere in order to be able to '*protect them*' from other nations of men, bandits, charming noblemen, the anti-Christ or whatever else was in fashion at the time.¹⁰⁵⁻¹⁰⁶

The picture has started to change quite drastically in the more recent decades – from women's ever-increasing involvement in grassroots-community activism to the official '*gender mainstreaming*' policies of the international organizations and governing bodies – and to the point indeed where there is such a wealth of literature on every problem imaginable within gender theory, that it becomes increasingly harder to distinguish between quality and not-so-quality, if the sheer amount of problems discussed there has not already paralysed your intentions.

Hence, it may be time for academia to take a seriously critical look at itself – one that goes past the methodological whims of that approach or the conceptual weakness of that one - and ask the more philosophical questions. Some of them seem to have been asked already, as the more recent and holistic approaches to ending GBV by working with survivors and perpetrators seem to evidence. However, I would go one step further and ask whether it is not time that we started focussing on working towards erasing the concept/idea of '*competitively using violence for self-gain*' from the human psyche, in order to truly create violence-free societies?

Instead of pouring resources into the continuous categorization, analysis and prescription of unsustainable, short-sighted development solutions situated within inherently exploitative economies – a practice which can only serve to manifest the existence of violence and exploitation in the collective mind and practice in the long run - maybe these resources should go into re-educating, training and deploying teachers to effect the change to non-violence as the defining characteristic of humanity where it is needed the most – in the minds of our future generations.

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