



# Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/tchs20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/tchs20)

## ‘[E]ven in our fear [...] we wanted to do this’: feminist organising for abortion in Africa as palimpsestic

Lucía Berro Pizzarossa, Ernestina Coast, Wanjiru Kareithi & Deirdre Duffy

To cite this article: Lucía Berro Pizzarossa, Ernestina Coast, Wanjiru Kareithi & Deirdre Duffy (13 Feb 2025): ‘[E]ven in our fear [...] we wanted to do this’: feminist organising for abortion in Africa as palimpsestic, Culture, Health & Sexuality, DOI: [10.1080/13691058.2025.2458081](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2025.2458081)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2025.2458081>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 13 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# '[E]ven in our fear [...] we wanted to do this': feminist organising for abortion in Africa as palimpsestic

Lucía Berro Pizzarossa<sup>a</sup>, Ernestina Coast<sup>b</sup>, Wanjiru Kareithi<sup>c</sup> and Deirdre Duffy<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of International Development, The London School of Economics, London, UK; <sup>c</sup>Office of the Associate Dean of Access & Equity, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA; <sup>d</sup>Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

## ABSTRACT

Activism for abortion rights and access in Africa is a vibrant and diverse movement that has become more prominent in recent years. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews with members and allies of the MAMA network (an African transnational pro-abortion activist network), this article explores the evolving landscape of feminist abortion rights activism in Africa, examining how activists navigate and reshape this complex terrain influenced by enduring historical, socio-cultural and political legacies. Employing the concept of the palimpsest as a lens, we examine how feminist organising for abortion rights and access unfolds in a context where historic scripts that limit African womens'—and African feminists'—agency have been imperfectly erased. We argue that activists record their experiences, strategies, successes and challenges on the societal landscape, creating a cumulative and evolving record, similar to a palimpsest, in which each contribution builds upon and reinterprets the layers that precede it. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of past and present struggles, the article contributes to deeper understanding of the complexities of feminist abortion activism in Africa, showing how these efforts contribute to broader struggles for gender and reproductive justice across the continent.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2024

Accepted 21 January

2025

## KEYWORDS

Abortion; activism; feminist organising; sexual and reproductive rights; Africa

## Introduction

Activism for abortion rights and access in Africa is a dynamic, multifaceted movement responding to the continent's unique historical, socio-cultural and political challenges. Despite the pervasive barriers created by colonial legacies, conflict and religious fundamentalism, African women have engaged in organised efforts to advance their interests across social, cultural, political and economic spheres (Daymond 2003). Unsafe abortion is a significant issue in Africa, where less than one quarter (24.4%) of all abortions are estimated to be safe (Bankole et al. 2020). While some countries, such

**CONTACT** Lucía Berro Pizzarossa  [L.berropizzarossa@bham.ac.uk](mailto:L.berropizzarossa@bham.ac.uk)

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

as Benin (2023) and São Tomé and Príncipe (2012), have expanded legal access to abortion, many challenges remain beyond legislation, including misconceptions about abortion's legality, misinterpretations of the law, uneven healthcare provision, insufficiently trained healthcare workers and pervasive abortion stigma (Center for Reproductive Rights n.d.). Against this backdrop, feminist organisations mobilise for meaningful abortion access.

This article explores the evolving landscape of abortion rights activism in Africa, emphasising the challenges faced by advocates today and the solutions they deploy. The analysis draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews conducted with members and allies of the MAMA Network (Mobilizing Activists Around Medication Abortion), a transnational network comprising over 70 organisations across 22 African countries working to increase access to self-managed medication abortion.<sup>1</sup>

The entanglement of activism and existing socio-cultural, material and political contours requires an analytic approach that underscores how historic contextual realities are visible within and actively woven through contemporary activism for abortion rights and access in Africa. Alexander (2005) describes this analytic approach as palimpsestive, where the present exists on 'a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times' (190). We use the concept of the palimpsest to emphasise that history and the present co-exist, are mutually affecting and grapple with each other (Okello and Duran 2021). Following Alexander, the palimpsest enables us to consider African abortion activism as an entanglement between the 'then and now' and 'here and there' (Alexander 2005, 190).

We explore the abortion rights movement as a transnational project, examining how feminists advocating for abortion are creating new forms of activism that are interwoven with diverse histories, social relations, material forces, technologies and national and international political agendas (Tamale 2020). Feminist organising in Africa is heterogeneous and evolving and spans organisation- and movement-building; policy engagement with the state; social, cultural, political and economic interventions; and destabilising discursive practices and arts-based approaches practices (Pereira 2017). We are particularly inspired by the work of the Nigerian scholar Charmaine Pereira who defines African feminist organising as having 'a vision, a sense of alternative possibilities of greater social justice alongside the liberation of women from all sources of oppression' (Pereira 2017, 16). Pereira subsequently poses the direct provocation: 'how has contemporary feminist organising in Africa addressed the nexus of strategy, voice and power?' (Pereira 2017, 16). The nexus she articulates is a specific, shared site of tension where strategic decisions by feminist movements can work in conflict with co-existent feminist mobilisations against, for example, colonialist discourses and patriarchal systems which have restricted African women's voices and (re)produced unequal gendered systems of power.

Tamale has noted that literature about Africa is rife with stereotypical and enduring images of 'a continent of mere humans without history, agency, or meaningful political or social life' (Tamale 2020, 23). African feminist organising has long resisted hegemonic ideas of being 'voiceless' (Kolawole 1997) or the largely silent representations of diversity and women's empowerment (Motlafi 2021). It has adapted and contextualised international agendas—to which African feminists have earlier contributed

(Tamale 2008)—and prioritised contextually grounded knowledge and values which connect feminist mobilisations across borders.

Against this background, this paper explores how contemporary feminist organising in Africa reclaims an ‘imperfectly erased’ palimpsest, addressing historical and ongoing silencing and the power structures sustaining gender oppression. Pereira (2017) and Tamale (2020) caution against replicating colonialist erasures or patriarchal systems under the guise of authenticity. Instead, they advocate transformative feminist mobilisation rooted in historical, material and socio-cultural contexts, while fostering inter-generational and cross-context solidarity. Guided by this framework, we examine how African feminist activists have reshaped abortion rights activism amid historical, socio-cultural and political legacies. Using data from interviews with MAMA Network members and allies, we analyse strategies such as legal advocacy, hotlines, community capacity building and policy engagement and highlight the transformative potential of their work, offering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of their activism.

The purpose of our exploration is not (only) to answer questions about abortion rights and access. Beyond this, we seek to extend the arguments of Newman, Liinason and others, which position feminist grassroots activists as consistently navigating a political ‘landscape of antagonism’ (Liinason 2021; Newman 2014) drawing attention to the ways activists move through local, national and international fields of power and meaning, disrupting and strategically navigating funding, community un-/support, and North/South power relations. Ultimately, analysing feminist organising as a palimpsest allows us to understand how activists inscribe, erase and re-inscribe power in ways that embody ‘the potential for future reinscriptions ... [and] for shifts in the balances of power’ (Dillon 2005, 255). The framework we develop shows how earlier iterations remain key to understanding the whole (Schreiber, Moss, and Staab 2007), as activists reshape the palimpsest by introducing new strategies, organisational methods and models of models, while drawing strength from its existing structure.

## Methods

In this study, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 individuals involved in abortion rights activism and feminist organising across 11 African countries (Table 1). One of the participants worked exclusively in a transnational capacity. The interviews varied in length from 41 to 68 minutes, with an average duration of 54 minutes. Participants were selected based on their leadership roles, with many being founders or current leaders of their organisations. To maintain focus on their professional and activist perspectives, no detailed personal data were collected. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, allowing for questions or clarifications. Participants were purposively sampled from activist networks in Africa, ensuring diversity in regional geography, legal abortion contexts, organisational focus and work type (e.g. advocacy, referral, hotline support).

Interviews were conducted in English between December 2021 and March 2022 using Zoom. They were undertaken by two interviewers who used a question guide (available from the corresponding author on request) developed by the authors. Two-interviewer interview approaches are an established, although rarely used, technique

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Legal restrictiveness of abortion in the context in which respondent is working <sup>a</sup>	Organisational focus or purpose in respondents' own words	Role	Personal motivations for involvement in abortion activism	Years working in abortion activism (if mentioned by participant)
To save a person's life	'... our organisation mainly work on the advocacy [...] we provide information, raise awareness on the SMAs [self-managed abortion] [...] it's digital and we are working illegally in our country'	Founder/leadership	'I'm a [profession] [...] what makes me to join [organisation] is because of the programme in terms of SRHR [...] my passion was [...] to make sure that these women have enjoyed their sexual reproductive health rights'	10
Prohibited altogether	'my work around abortion is, has been very tied to the association of [profession] because I'm a [profession] by training, and [...] they have been the one at the forefront of the struggle in [country]'	Professional role	'I identify as a radical feminist who is very much about choice in anything that we live or debate'	–
Working regionally across African countries with a range of legal restrictiveness	'We are improving access to comprehensive sexual education by influencing political and also legal empowerment with [profession] in different countries'	Programme coordinator	'I've experienced a situation where women, the girls at school who had abortions [...] some of them had died [...] So, my passion for abortion comes from there [...]'	–
Prohibited altogether [respondent also works transnationally]	'a transnational young feminist alliance [...] at the intersections of sexual reproductive justice and economic and environmental justice'	Organiser/Researcher	'I think I know too much to just bail out [...] I have a responsibility to continue doing what I'm doing'	10
To preserve health	'works with young mothers and adolescent girls on access to sexual and reproductive health [...] we advocate for women accessing safe abortion, and more so self-medication abortion'	Programme manager	'one day we had a girl [...] she tried having an abortion [...] unfortunately we lost her [...] that is the time we started now talking about abortion'	7
To preserve health	'to bridge the gap of girls and women with disabilities on access – or while accessing sexual reproductive and health services, abortion being a key reproductive health service'	Founder	'I have [disability] [...] in my previous work I would suggest we target girls and women with disabilities. And it was not a priority [...] I started working with girls and women with disabilities. Because I had seen the gap that had been left'	4
To preserve health	'advocacy on access to comprehensive sexual reproductive health and rights and with more emphasis on access to safe and legal abortion in (country)'	Programme manager	'just knowing that I can be that link to women and girls having access to these crucial services motivates me the more. [...] That keeps me going for another day'	6
To preserve health	'to create spaces for people to have frank conversations about sex and sexuality [...] we have been developing facilitation guides or creating safe spaces so we can have those conversations in safe ways'	Leadership	'It's those moments that you pause and celebrate, you dance and live to fight another day'	15

(Continued)

**Table 1.** Continued.

Legal restrictiveness of abortion in the context in which respondent is working <sup>a</sup>	Organisational focus or purpose in respondents' own words	Role	Personal motivations for involvement in abortion activism	Years working in abortion activism (if mentioned by participant)
To save a person's life	'to improve women's health as well as ensure that they enjoy their sexual reproductive health and rights [...] we do this through a programme of activities and through community interventions' [withheld]	Founder/leadership	'through my personal experience [...] I don't want any other woman to suffer what I have really gone through in life'	–
On request (gestational limits apply)		Leadership	'an unconscious political commitment to redress these things [unsafe abortion] that I saw'	
Broad social or economic grounds	'a young feminist non-profit organisation [...] working with children and women specifically women who are victims of sexual and gender-based violence [...]'	Founder/Leadership	'[...] I did research and realised things were actually worse [...] it just really pissed me off and it made me realise like I need to do something'	4
Broad social or economic grounds	'a movement that is about promoting bodily autonomy and sexual rights with a strong focus on access to clinical abortion'	Leadership	'I know that I'm putting my life in danger but there's no such thing as putting your life in danger when you know that there are so many other people that need to exercise their rights'	12
To preserve health	'a social movement of grassroots feminists, activists and community organisers [...] we are very vocal with our work and especially our radical feminist work [...] especially access to safe abortion'	Founder/leadership	'I am just a grassroots, feminist, activist'	5
To save a person's life	'a sex led organization for diverse women...of different origins, different sexual orientation, gender identity, and age'	Founder/leadership	'I am now empowered, so I know it is possible for someone to have an abortion freely if you want to because it saved me'	2
To save a person's life	'working on sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and young girls...we've been providing services on safe abortion'	Leadership	'[...] a lot of people are dying of unsafe abortion with many complications, and everybody still keep quiet [...] So I just say, look, this is a good way to give a kick start and, actually, to save women, like, put smiles on faces of women and let them be the one to take the decision themselves'	2

<sup>a</sup>Defined using Center for Reproductive Rights (n.d.) categories: Prohibited altogether; To save a person's life; To preserve health; Broad social or economic grounds; On request (Gestational limits). See (<https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/>).

in the social sciences (Velardo and Elliott 2021). The research team included two people with ‘insider’ experience of working with and for the MAMA network, and two other authors were experienced researchers of abortion and ‘outsiders’ to the MAMA network.

Each interview was conducted by a combination of an insider with an established connection to the respondent, and an outsider. We adopted this approach for two key reasons. First, the trust established between one interviewer and the participant was essential in reassuring them about the purpose, conduct and confidentiality of the interviews, especially for activists working in sensitive and legally restrictive abortion contexts. The second interviewer, unfamiliar to the respondent, facilitated a more conversational dynamic, allowing for greater flexibility in exploring responses. In addition, the insider interviewers gained valuable experience from the more seasoned outsider interviewers, learning to ask probing questions and follow the respondent’s lead.

Ethical issues were addressed throughout our project. Our decision to conduct the interviews were driven by the imperative to make visible the work of African feminist abortion activists. Throughout the study, we grappled with our insider and outsider statuses and individual positionalities. During the interview process and analyses we sought to consider how our personal beliefs and professional experiences influenced our questions and interpretations. Our commitment to care for the interviewees was reflected in our anonymised and de-identified approach to describing our sample and presenting their words as quotes; this necessarily means that some detail is lost (e.g. by never identifying countries). This loss of detail was required to prioritise our respondents’ safety and work. Ethics review was provided at Manchester Metropolitan University (Reference: 17871) and the London School of Economics (Reference: 27633).

An external transcription service transcribed the interview recordings: each transcript was then checked and corrected by the authors. We analysed the transcripts facilitated by Dedoose. Our thematic analytic framework involved the organisation of qualitative data around a number of several cross-cutting themes, with an initial codebook based on the interview guide and our initial transcript re-readings. Three authors independently coded three transcripts using this initial codebook, after which team discussion identified additional sub-codes. All transcripts were double-coded; additional sub-codes were added following discussion throughout the coding both with the research team and members of the MAMA Network (with whom we shared the data).

In line with the palimpsest framework, our methodological approach embraced a layered, iterative coding process that unearthed new insights during each round of analysis, revealing and connecting layers of meaning. This allowed us to view participants’ narratives as a layered text, with each reading uncovering further nuances. These themes are not the only possible interpretation of the data; our positionalities and identities impact on data and themes, and themes need to be contextualised.

## Findings

### *Feminist organising for abortion as a palimpsest*

Focusing on three components—feminism, organising and abortion—we discuss our interviewees’ activism through the lens of the palimpsest. Interviewees engaged in

diverse forms of abortion activism: they undertook advocacy, ran helplines, provided workshops and programmes for capacity building and offered mentorship. Although all interviewees were involved in efforts to facilitate access to abortion, the focus of their activism extended beyond this topic (to issues such as contraception, period poverty and the decriminalisation of sex work) and recognised that abortion was intricately connected to other fundamental rights. They collaborated with diverse stakeholders—community health workers, pharmacists, doctors, hotline operators—forming a constellation of actors affecting people’s trajectories to abortion care.

### ***Reframing abortion rights***

Abortion rights activism in Africa has undergone significant growth despite restricted access to abortion in general. Effort has coalesced through the grassroots movement activism of feminist-led organisations, the allyship of like-minded medical service providers, and the passion of feminist and allied advocates, who have worked to shift the praxis and paradigm of the abortion narrative in Africa. Interviewee’s accounts located abortion at the centre of their work, including reclaiming the word abortion. Activists confronted the deep silence and stigma surrounding abortion (Casey et al. 2019; Ouedraogo et al. 2023), including participants’ own experiences, and through their activism, activists sought to open dialogue and ownership over abortion. Recognising the stigma that abortion entails, one participant shared:

[E]ven to say the word abortion is quite difficult for people, so when you come and you have to discuss abortion, they can see you as a sinner, as a killer, as an abortifacient, I personally, I don’t see that, as a barrier actually but more as a challenge, I know what I am talking about. (Programme coordinator, regional)

The assertion that their activism was distinctly African was pivotal in interviewees’ narratives. As scholars such as Ayo Coly (2013) have demonstrated, African feminists’ engagement with history is shaped by imperial legacies and local constructions of tradition, which often serve as tools of resistance against feminist and progressive movements. In their accounts, interviewees sought to disrupt narratives that positioned Africa as ahistorical and challenge constructions of history and ‘African tradition’ that were mobilised to oppose feminist and reproductive justice agendas. For study participants, asserting that their work is distinctly African was central to challenging perceptions of abortion as a ‘Western’ issue.

For advocates, an African approach meant much more than a geographic marker—it signified a commitment to engaging with Africa’s cultural diversity and complex histories. Positioning their activism as ‘African’, ‘local’, ‘grassroots’ and ‘community-led’ they navigated tradition and modernity, situating abortion rights within local, historically informed contexts while connecting to broader global movements (Chiweshe and Macleod 2018). Participants described using ‘African sayings’ and narratives (such as Ubuntu) and decolonial and anti-imperial methodologies in their work. They translated and developed materials in non-colonial local languages and strategically used traditional attire to navigate spaces. Their assertion of African identity involved embracing cultural traditions and critiquing their use against progressive agendas. The practice of blending Indigenous histories with modern discourses on human rights exemplified



the use of a palimpsestic approach—layering new meanings onto pre-existing cultural narratives around reproductive autonomy in Africa.

The concept of the palimpsest however served to highlight how their work re-inscribed and added to an ‘imperfectly erased’ text, such that the activism revealed hidden, suppressed narratives within African societies. This layered activism addressed both Western and African discourses that portray abortion as foreign to Africa, showcasing the complexity of African histories and their selective erasure. Rather than negating these histories, activists highlighted a range of voices, in ways that aligned with Africa’s diverse cultural landscape and defied reductionist views of African traditions as uniformly anti-abortion. Interviewees constructed and amplified alternative narratives while challenging and resisting hegemonic narratives of the perceived ‘voicelessness’ of marginalised communities. They described experiences of being silenced for working on abortion while also being considered ‘loud’ by other civil society organisations; and experiences of only having a say in the implementation of projects but not in the design of them.

Where is our voice? And when we talk about our voice, when we talk about the issues that are affecting us, we also have to link it with access to safe abortion. (Founder/leadership, national organisation)

Challenging narratives that framed them as voiceless, not only in the topics and tone of their work, but also in their role as ‘beneficiaries’ rather than active agents and key stakeholders in shaping solutions, the issue of silence was further problematised when interviewees talked of the strategic breaking of silence. Strategies of speaking openly on abortion in some settings coexisted with the creation of ‘whisper networks’ in which information was discreetly shared with those who could not yet break the silence. On the one hand, abortion becomes visible and normal when activists actively challenge abortion stigma:

[T]alk about it as much as you don’t want to talk about, it’s happening in your area. You know someone who has had one. (Founder/leadership, national organisation)

But on the other hand, participants’ voices as activists (loudly speaking and quietly whispering) became something constructed, negotiated and maintained—layered over the silence.

By centring the social fabric and the ‘communal’, activists presented their activism as dynamic and relational; their principles, approaches and strategies were in constant dialogue with their communities (Berro Pizzarossa and Nandagiri 2021). Interviewees described multiple ways in which they acted as connectors and weavers of community bonds, with their work extending beyond supporting safe abortion trajectories to establishing networks and support systems (Coast et al. 2018). This work involved the creation of hotlines, training programmes for service providers, collaboration with pharmacists and programmes around the reinsertion of women and girls who had had abortions back into their communities. One interviewee explained:

[J]ust knowing that I can be that link to women and girls having access to these crucial [abortion] services motivates me the more [...] (Programme manager, national organisation)

Acknowledging that ‘power is within the community’, interviewees spoke of the power of ‘replicating’ and ‘sharing’ materials (developed in Braille, for example), setting up ‘referral systems’, directing, connecting and building ‘safe and sustainable’ communities. Positioning themselves as connectors within a broader social fabric, they sought to weave together diverse threads of collective action, thereby reshaping and rewriting a traditionally liberal, individual-centred understanding of human rights.

Within transnational networks, activists found solidarity that bolstered local resilience and broadened their perspectives. International gatherings provided, in one interviewee’s words, ‘moments of connection and solidarity’, creating a space in which to share practices and fuel innovation. ‘At a point, we just wanted to withdraw from abortion work’, said one national leader, ‘but then because of these organisations and this network that are there, they give you strength to continue’. Another participant described transnational spaces as fostering and inspiring bolder strategies: ‘It gives energy and stimulates me intellectually... transnational organising has been fuelling my energy’ (Organizer/research, Trans/national).

The international also appeared as a site for the exploration of radical and more innovative work,

I think the one thing that always comforted us are honestly the global hotline meetings. Because alone, we would start to say, ‘hey maybe we are crazy, maybe we need to stop this mindset’. But then we would go to this meeting, and we’d be like, ‘wait a minute, there are more crazy people out here’, and we’d be like, like, we felt we are in good company. (Leadership, national organisation)

[W]hen I come to those spaces with my challenges at a national level, [...] you find yourself at home (Programme coordinator, regional organisation)

These experiences add layers to the palimpsest of their activism, in which activists’ struggles and challenges are inscribed alongside their efforts to reshape the narratives around abortion and the dialogue between the national and international. Within this context, interviewees’ resilience became a form of rewriting, as they continued to advocate for abortion despite attempts to suppress their voices, bringing the national in conversation with the international.

### ***(Re)creating the feminist***

In the evolving landscape of abortion activism in Africa, a significant and transformative force has been the emergence of explicitly feminist movements and perspectives (Ahikire 2014). In our interviews, the (re)clamation of the term ‘feminist’ signified a powerful response that sought to directly address and disrupts specific narratives that have framed feminism as a Western import, incongruent with African identities, or disconnected from local struggles. All interviewees described themselves as feminists, explaining what it meant to be a feminist and undertake feminist activism through feminist theory and praxis. Rejecting the notion that feminism is incongruent with their African identities, interviewees embraced the feminist label as a symbol of defiance, reshaping its meaning within the contours of their experiences and struggles.

[O]ur goal is to destroy and like disrupt, completely disrupt the patriarchal system that we live in, in our country and to create new cultures that are more feminist (Founder, national organisation)

[W]e have to drive leadership that is a feminist approach and intersectionality approach that includes all issues (Founder/Leadership, national organisation)

By naming and reframing oppressive structures, activists layered their experiences onto historical frameworks, creating a palimpsestic narrative in the form of a rewriting that incorporated their struggles and triumphs. They asserted that feminism in Africa was not a borrowed ideology but a reclamation and continuation of African women's long-standing traditions of resistance. This act of naming asserted their presence within the broader feminist movement and reconfigured the historical discourse, demonstrating how contemporary feminist identities in Africa are constructed in dialogue with, and sometimes opposition to, past narratives. The work of participants was shaped by material and political realities and the histories of the African space as influenced by [neo]colonial powers

We understand like countries like [country] is extremely patriarchal, it is based in—we are talking about African patriarchy and colonial patriarchy and Christian patriarchy, right. (Founder, national organisation)

Interviewees reflected on their own stories and their (re)writing as they grappled with their individual and community histories while navigating their evolution and movement.

The reason why I thought things weren't bad (around access to abortion) was because of the type of family I grew up in from the economic status and the way my family thought, that compared to the majority of (country) girls those things were very different. (Founder, national organisation)

[W]e had started to have conversations about abortion, and we realised that we did not have a lot [of] answers, most of what we had were questions. (Leader, National organisation)

Positioning themselves as feminists and making meaning of this was not an individual enterprise, but was instead a deeply interconnected, relational and dialogical construction. Many interviewees saw themselves as 'empowered' and 'privileged' to be able to do feminist work.

I mean, I think I know too much to just bail out [...] I feel responsible for how much knowledge and experiences and exposure, like the different things that I got exposed to transnationally to, I feel it's ... I have a responsibility to continue doing what I'm doing. (Organiser/researcher, national and transnational)

In their accounts, interviewees stressed the centrality of African feminisms and intersectionality as a palimpsestic practice (Mekgwe 2008; Osha 2008) that disrupted mainstream narratives by layering contemporary feminist praxis over historical erasures and exclusions.

[A]lso removing this idea that feminism is founded for elite women or bougie Black women. (Founder, national organisation)

This articulation was dynamic and evolved through reflection and dialogue, as activists engaged with their histories and communities to redefine feminism in ways that resonated with their lived realities. Such a reframing validated the experiences and

struggles of women from diverse backgrounds and underscored the intersectionality that lies at the core of the abortion rights movement. Interviewees reflected on the concept of feminism by recognising the importance of resisting the tendency to make essentialising assumptions. In connection with the exclusion of groups made marginal, one interviewee reflected,

We have to be full on feminist, do not be homophobic, do not be transphobic, or else we can't work with you (Founder, national organisation)

While interviewees were rooted in their local contexts, their work transcended geographical boundaries and involved forging meaningful connections within international networks. The significance of these global connections was articulated in terms of the transformative power of these interactions.

And I think every time we exchange with them [activists from other regions], we get some strength, and we are ashamed that in such a 'safe' context we are not capable of doing half of what the Argentinian, the Mexican and the Indian or the Lebanese woman do (Professional, national and international)

Here, the interviewee reflects on the inspiration and motivation drawn from interactions with activists in other regions. Such exchanges compelled activists to critically reassess their own efforts. Interaction with other activists served as a means of both drawing from and re-inscribing the ongoing narrative of their struggle, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of their work within a broader global context.

Interviewees highlighted the dynamic construction of alliances as a palimpsestic process, whereby layers of collaboration are built, redefined and negotiated over time. One activist described their work as 'strategically looking and mapping and building support' with diverse groups including sex workers, trade unions and medical students. Another emphasised the intentional and ongoing nature of this work through annual mapping exercises to identify 'the spaces where we engage'. For interviewees, solidarity—particularly international solidarity—was not to be assumed or static but needed to be continually fostered, created and reconfigured (Dosekun 2021). In the palimpsestic construction of alliances, the boundaries and limits of solidarity were constantly renegotiated, reflecting the evolving and iterative nature of participants' activism.

Throughout interviewees' accounts, abortion is construed as a feminist issue, central to the demand for gender justice. Activists took a highly critical position in relation to non-activist actors who approached abortion without an intersectional lens or an analysis of race, class, disability and other power structures. One activist criticised the uncritical alignment of 'mainstream feminists' in their country with the government's abortion agenda, which prioritised population control over autonomy and reproductive agency.

[F]eminists going on Instagram like demanding abortion to be included in reproductive health services, in alignment with the state's interest in capping the population. (Organiser/researcher, trans/national)

Their own work challenges these reductive narratives, advocating for abortion access as a means of achieving gender justice and reproductive autonomy. Another activist highlighted the importance of addressing often ignored issues, such as disability.

[H]ad not seen a lot of disability intersecting with the SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] rights in the mainstream platform. So, I believe it's something new that we are putting on the plate and that people are embracing. (Founder, national organisation)

Feminist abortion activism as interviewees presented it, was best understood as radical, disruptive, transgressive and evolving.

[W]e are providing information and help that most organisations are too afraid to get into [...] we are just the ones that are like okay you are too afraid to do it, we can do it don't worry, we will do all the dirty work. (Founder, national organisation)

This activism continually evolves to meet the needs of abortion-seekers, often challenging established norms and confronting what is seen as 'taboo' or 'extremely controversial'. On the tapestry of what participants saw as 'mainstream' abortion work, they inscribed a more radical way of working. Interviewees understood their activism to be different because it involved,

[T]aking the power away from all these experts and lobbyists and legal works, you know, to actually the community and the women who have faced the issue (Leadership, national organisation).

Such work was seen as feminist because it was deeply interwoven with survival and the fight for a liveable life.

They have realised that those who have nothing, who have now nothing to lose because they have lost everything, are still standing. (Professional role)

Feminist activists continually redefined their movement boundaries so as to remain relevant and responsive to the diverse needs of their communities. Their work disrupted and reconfigured existing power structures seeking to reclaim agency and voice for those excluded from mainstream feminist discourse.

### ***Organising: values, strategies and alliances***

As the palimpsest is re-/written, organising tactics need to adapt to specific needs and circumstances, leaving a lasting impression on the abortion movement's trajectory. Interviewees spoke of 'horse trading and political manoeuvring', highlighting the need to negotiate between reformist and more radical projects and between 'playing the game' (collaborating with organisations that do not work in the same way or do not work on abortion) and severing ties with organisations that excluded certain populations:

[W]e avoid working with organisations that their values are not in line with access to abortion. If they're not free, totally free to talk about issues on abortion or issues on access to sexual and reproductive health, we don't force them. We can collaborate in other things (Programme manager, national organisation)

Interviewees described selecting collaborators who might not align perfectly with all aspects of their feminist agenda but who nonetheless might contribute to the broader goals of the movement. This strategic pragmatism allowed them to stretch the boundaries of their activism and reflected a continuous process of negotiation

and redefinition, each decision adding a new layer to the movement's history, building upon past experiences while being flexible to respond to present and future challenges.

The relationship between social movements and the state or government is a key theme in understanding abortion activism. Interviewees highlighted the friction between more established or mainstream organisations and those working on the margins doing the 'dirty work'. They critiqued the blurred lines between social movements and government, denouncing the limitations imposed by national government agendas or certain organisations' views.

[Y]ou have very well-known women's rights organisations like, you know, recognised even by the Government and, you know, they are invited everywhere. And so those organisations, those working on contentious issues, for lack of a better word, have been trying to get them to join the struggle and it has been very difficult because, you know, they have nothing to gain by starting to work on something that isn't popular. (Professional role)

Participants described how organisations that were 'recognised by the government' often had access to spaces of power through 'closed door meetings to government to negotiate'. Interviewees deployed a series of different strategies to stretch the boundaries and navigate their relationship with different actors, including using their cultural identity and aesthetics to 'dress the part' when advocating for abortion and human rights. Our interviewee critically reflected on how the use of traditional attire—complying with gender and cultural norms—enabled her to assert herself as a member of the community in a way that connected her to her audience and distanced her from the accusation that abortion and human rights more broadly were a Western imposition.

Participants were also conscious of the importance of language in the naming and framing of discussion of abortion

[H]ow we frame it [is important] to make it acceptable within the Ministry of Health but also within a community. (Programme coordinator)

So, in the community people don't want to hear abortion so what we do we start, we have an entry point, we start with postpartum haemorrhage... and then after [that], we get to using the 'safe abortion', and abortion. (Founder/leadership, national organisation)

Activists also considered how secretive or open they could be about their work.

[W]e want to pass the message, how to pass [on] the message without getting ourselves penalised by the government... We don't share materials containing abortion. (Leadership, national organisation)

Solidarity and allyship were not static assumptions but continually evolving constructs.

[...] trying to advise the main, traditional [...] mainstream SRH organisation to make their service available to the women but at the same time ensure, like, it's flexible and it's flexible in terms of ensuring [...] How accessible is it? How affordable is it? (Founder/leadership, national organisation)

Together, these statements illuminated a conscious and ongoing process of strategic alignment, whereby the commitment to allyship remained contingent upon the

existence of a shared set of values and objectives. They also reflected the need for a shared political vision as a foundation for collaboration:

[W]e have our own map, of who we consider allies, who we know that those are our accomplices, those are people who have the same ambition, we might not have the same exact you know, ways of work, but the politics are there. (Organiser/researcher, trans/national)

The strategic framing of abortion issues so as to make them more palatable in different contexts reflects how activists rewrite their messaging to align with both government and community expectations. This balancing act between secrecy and openness, between maintaining autonomy and navigating external pressures, added a new layer to the movement's history, building on past experiences while adapting to present challenges.

Ultimately, interviewees sought to feel, speak and act in reference to categories set by culture, patriarchy and Global South/North dynamics, without being determined by them. They navigated and responded to these categories without being wholly constrained by them. In this way, activism emerged not as a monolithic entity but as a dynamic, adaptive process that intersected with social, political, economic and cultural forces, further (re)inscribing the palimpsest.

## Conclusion

Following Pereira's (2017) provocation, in this paper we have sought to show how strategies, alliances, context and voice add new layers to the palimpsest while also revealing aspects that may have been obscured or made marginal. Understanding feminist organising as palimpsestic allows us to demonstrate that activists are neither untethered from historical power dynamics nor neo-colonial enmeshments (Olusanya et al. 2021) nor 'clients or beneficiaries' who 'receive' (Lewis 2010, 21). Our analyses have located feminist organising as a site of contestation and generation in which activists dynamically disrupt, create and transform.

The interviews we conducted reveal a landscape in which activists negotiated between reformist and radical projects, navigated the complexities of collaborating with or distancing themselves from organisations with divergent values and critically assessed the blurred boundaries between social movements and governmental bodies. Tensions between established, mainstream organisations and those operating at the margins underscored the complex power dynamics at play in a context where access to spaces of influence often shaped the direction of activism. In this study, interviewed activists demonstrated resilience and adaptability, employing diverse strategies to expand the boundaries of advocacy while continually reassessing alliances and objectives.

By explicitly adopting the label of 'feminist', activists sought to defy the understanding that being feminist and African are 'incongruent' identities. In the words of Kolawole, 'African women did not learn about self-assertion from the West' (1997, 10). Drawing inspiration from African feminist movements while adapting their strategies to address contemporary challenges, and overtly embodying feminist praxis across and through different sites of action, together illustrate the palimpsestic

nature of interviewees' abortion activism. Their work involved a dialogue between past and present as part of the continuing struggle for agency and abortion rights, requiring activist interventions at the domestic, local, national and transnational level. As Alexander has asserted, a palimpsest 'rescrambles the "here and now" and the "then and there" to become a "here and there" and a "then and now"' (Alexander 2005, 190).

In this study, interviewees' strategic considerations transcended the immediate concerns of abortion access, including decisions about operating within or outside of hegemonic models, the imperative to safeguard transnational spaces and the crucial task of building feminist solidarity. Instead, activists entered into these spaces by inscribing their experiences, strategies, successes and challenges on the social canvas, confronting stigma and reclaiming agency. They traversed the deconstruction, reconstruction and reimagining of feminist abortion activism to challenge assumptions about abortion in Africa, reimagine power relations and dynamics and defend their personal and collective agency. By engaging with activists who moved across a variety of geographical and cultural landscapes, we were able to witness a reshaping of abortion discourse and a profound reimagining of the broader societal tapestry, echoing the voices of those who are often made marginal as they reclaim space within the global abortion movement.

## Note

1. Mobilizing Activists Around Medical Abortion (MAMA Network) is a collaboration of grassroots activists and feminist groups working in Africa. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://mamanetwork.org/>.

## Acknowledgements

We express our deepest gratitude to the abortion activists who generously shared their time, experiences and perspectives, illuminating the complexities and nuances of abortion rights activism in their contexts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the British Academy; the Leverhulme Trust; and the LSE Department of International Development Research Infrastructure and Investment Fund.

## References

- Ahikire, J. 2014. "African Feminism in Context." *Feminist Africa* 19: 7–23.
- Alexander, M. J. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.



- Bankole, A., L. Remez, O. Owolabi, J. Philbin, and P. Williams. 2020. "From Unsafe to Safe Abortion in Sub-Saharan Africa: Slow But Steady Progress." New York: Guttmacher Institute. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/from-unsafe-to-safe-abortion-in-subsaharan-africa>
- Berro Pizarrossa, L., and R. Nandagiri. 2021. "Self-Managed Abortion: A Constellation of Actors, a Cacophony of Laws?" *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 29 (1): 1899730–1899764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2021.1899764>.
- Casey, S. E., V. J. Steven, J. Deitch, E. F. Dumas, M. C. Gallagher, S. Martinez, C. N. Morris, R. V. Rafanoharana, and E. Wheeler. 2019. "'You Must First Save Her Life': Community Perceptions Towards Induced Abortion and Post-Abortion Care in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27 (1): 106–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09688080.2019.1571309>.
- Center for Reproductive Rights. n.d. "The World's Abortion Laws." Accessed April 22, 2024. <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/worlds-abortion-laws/>
- Chiweshe, M., and C. Macleod. 2018. "Cultural De-colonization Versus Liberal Approaches to Abortion in Africa: The Politics of Representation and Voice." *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 22 (2): 49–59. <https://doi.org/10.29063/ajrh2018/v22i2.5>.
- Coast, E., A. H. Norris, A. M. Moore, and E. Freeman. 2018. "Trajectories of Women's Abortion-Related Care: A Conceptual Framework." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 200: 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.035>.
- Coly, A. A. 2013. "Homophobic Africa? Introduction." *African Studies Review* 56 (2): 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39>.
- Daymond, M. J. 2003. *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*. New York: Feminist Press at CUNY.
- Dillon, S. 2005. "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies." *Textual Practice* 19 (3): 243–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360500196227>.
- Dosekun, S. 2021. "African Feminisms." In *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, edited by Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola, 47–63. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolawole, M. E. 1997. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Lewis, D. 2010. "Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms." *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* XX: 77–96.
- Linason, M. 2021. "'Drawing the Line' and Other Small-Scale Resistances: Exploring Agency and Ambiguity in Transnational Feminist and Queer NGOs." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23 (1): 102–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1775489>.
- Mekgwe, P. 2008. "Theorizing African Feminism(s): The 'Colonial' Question." *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* XX: 11–22.
- Motlafi, N. 2021. "Silencing and Voicing the Subaltern." In *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, edited by Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, and Catia Cecilia Confortini. London: Routledge.
- Newman, J. 2014. "Landscapes of Antagonism: Local Governance, Neoliberalism and Austerity." *Urban Studies* 51 (15): 3290–3305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098013505159>.
- Okello, W. K., and A. Duran. 2021. "'Here and There, Then and Now': Envisioning a Palimpsest Methodology." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20: 160940692110422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921104223>.
- Olusanya, J. O., O. I. Ubogu, F. O. Njokanma, and B. O. Olusanya. 2021. "Transforming Global Health Through Equity-Driven Funding." *Nature Medicine* 27 (7): 1136–1138. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-021-01422-6>.
- Osha, S. 2008. "Introduction: African Feminisms." *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* XX: 5–9.
- Ouedraogo, R., G. Kimemia, E. K. Igonya, S. Athero, S. Wanjiru, M. Bangha, and K. Juma. 2023. "'They Talked to Me Rudely'. Women's Perspectives on Quality of Post-Abortion Care in Public Health Facilities In Kenya." *Reproductive Health* 20 (1): 35. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-023-01580-5>.
- Pereira, C. 2017. "Feminists Organising—Strategy, Voice, Power." *Feminist Africa* 22: 16–30.

- Schreiber, J. B., C. M. Moss, and J. M. Staab. 2007. "A Preliminary Examination of a Theoretical Model For Researching Educator Beliefs." *Semiotica* 2007 (164): 153–172. <https://doi.org/10.1515/SEM.2007.023>.
- Tamale, S. 2008. "The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A Critical Perspective on Women's Sexual Rights in Africa." *Feminist Legal Studies* 16 (1): 47–69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-007-9078-6>.
- Tamale, S. 2020. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Ottawa: Daraja Press.
- Velardo, S., and S. Elliott. 2021. "Co-Interviewing in Qualitative Social Research: Prospects, Merits and Considerations." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20: 16094069211054920. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211054920>.