



Local commitments, transnational solidarity

AFRICAN WOMEN ACTIVISTS' DEEP COMMITMENTS
IN DOING WOMEN, PEACE & SECURITY WORK



Women, Peace and Security

Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity
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We write as a transnational constellation of women, rooted in the work of activists in Lesotho, Nigeria, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, with a small set of academic women from the United States working alongside. This collective includes, but is not limited, to:

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The report authors are Sedef Ozoguz (Ph.D. student, Critical Psychology, Graduate Center, CUNY) and Katia Henrys (Ph.D. student, Critical Psychology, Graduate Center, CUNY), with contributions from Pearlyn Neo (MA, Columbia University), whose research and interviews supported its creation. Dr. Michelle Fine at the Graduate Center offered substantive editorial contributions and insights, and Meredith Forsyth, WPS Program Coordinator, contributed editorial and design contributions. Sophia Rhee (Staff Associate, AC4) and Whitney Okujagu (Program Associate, WPS) have also supported the team throughout this project.

In a time of global crisis brought forward by the COVID-19 pandemic, we offer this piece as a testament to the power of transnational collaboration, and to honor the rich collective commitments which women peacebuilders bring to forward sustainable peace in their communities, their countries, and their everyday lives. We thank the 2020 Peace and Social Change Fellowship participants, for their thoughtful and generative contributions to this project. Now and always, we are grateful for their leadership and expertise, as well as their ongoing commitments to creating a more peaceful and just world for all.



We write collaboratively with/through/alongside a set of African women's organizations, each of which are dedicated to intergenerational work, in the midst of COVID-19, grounded in local practices, and committed to peace and security at a moment when girls and women worldwide are locked in homes that are often not very safe – here or there, then or now.

We have spent a year learning from and with five organizations, situated in Lesotho, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Uganda and Nigeria. Some are small and new, while others are longstanding networks; some dedicated to influencing Parliament and others to securing sanitary napkins for young women coming of age in their neighborhood. These organizations and nations have distinct histories and struggles, and yet there is a vibrant transnational feminist courage, relationality, insistence on dignity and care across generations that animates from each, and across.

Collectively, our work has been challenged by COVID-19 making it impossible to re-experience the warmth that is so dear to us and to the way solidarity manifests itself amongst us. Making it impossible to sing together again, be in each other's physical presence, to care for each other, to talk, listen, touch, hug, laugh, and dream out loud as a group. It's in the physical presence where we ate, danced, prayed, dealt with conflicts together, that we created a world where we could all be seen and see each other. It is within this lived experience that sometimes unexpected connections flourished between women from different countries, and most importantly, from different faiths. As if the pandemic and the impossibility to be in each other's company again in Nairobi – where we first convened in January of 2020 – was not enough, we were very challenged by the departure of one of our members, Agnes. It never occurred to us that the reality of our differences across the world would be reminded of us so vividly.

On August 10th, Agnes Iksilon passed away a few days after giving birth to a baby girl. Agnes was the Social Worker at the Suubi Center in Kibuku in rural Uganda. Agnes offered Christian prayers several mornings during our workshop in Nairobi in January, to accompany Muslim payers – as she did, she was actively participating in respecting other people's faith, seeing the light and beauty in everyone, willing to trust, share and foster deep connections with people she just met. Agnes leaves four children and a husband in sadness, and her competencies are already missed in the organization and the Kibuku community where the needs are so daunting.

Each time you read “we” in this essay, bear in mind that it is a complex “we.” Some of us don’t have personal cell phones and it takes hours to get to the nearest city. At the same time, others live in one of the most expensive cities in the world – New York – and work at one of the better-ranked and wealthiest private universities on the planet – Columbia University. And between these extremes reside intermediary realities in the U.S. and in continental Africa. Our “we” cannot flatten this reality. It’s a “we” that says that while this capitalist world continues to create disparities, we were able to connect, work, share and be together at a level that allowed the co-creation of this piece.

This piece reflects the work each organization or network participating in the 2020 Peace & Social Change Fellowship is doing. It is written in the spirit of sharing information about challenges and successes and building connections between African women activists and collectives. We write this article with/alongside these women and their organizations, with the aim of making visible the incredible work each organization undertakes and the rich capillaries of care and courage that connect us across. We write for audiences very local to the activists themselves and those far away to appreciate the commitments, joys and political strategies of African women activists who are at once fierce and caring, dedicated to local praxis. We write, as well, recognizing that Global North universities have an obligation to be accountable to movements for justice, to lend whatever resources we have, to practice whatever humilities we can find, and to honor the work, in this case, of African women activists mobilizing for justice in the early 21st century.

“After listening to all of us, so now, we know, that colonialism is not over.”

– Ruth Ochieng, August 18, 2020

We gathered together in person in January before the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequently over Zoom and Skype calls and WhatsApp voice notes, depending on Internet access to connect us. Those of us – working from the Global North – actually have roots around the world. We are North American, Turkish, from Singapore and Haiti; we are interested in gender justice, peace and security, decolonial methods and research designed in ways participatory and liberatory; we identify as academics, activists, students, colleagues, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and more. We have promised ourselves, and each other, that anything we produce will value and honor our transnational relations, will be published in English and French (reflecting the varied colonial linguist footprints that define our collaboration), will be read and edited and read again by the women activists in Africa, who will offer edits/ideas/critique/art, and will be designed to “be of use” in their local contexts, a mirror of their practices and commitments and a feminist string of radical

commitments lived/enacted/engaged across. These are our collective commitments to participatory documentation, a rich sense of consent and care.

Through this piece, we hope to showcase the incredible work of each organization, their deep connection to their roots that are their communities, inspiring all of us who have roots in other parts of the world, as well as their commitment to transnational solidarity, their devotion to learning from each other. We believe that this is the true beauty and power of transnational work that is grounded in local activist work. We begin with the humble contributions of each group, diving deeper into the issues they face in their own communities and how they take care of these particular issues. As we learn from each organization/network, we will also witness how they are interwoven with the work of other collectives, drawing forth powerful common commitments in doing transnational solidarity work that runs through the peace and security organizations.



TRUST, CARE, AND CONSENT

Let us begin with the story and work of Barali Foundation, an organization that specializes in sexual and reproductive health and rights education in rural areas of Lesotho. Established in 2017 by a group of closely-knit friends committed to social justice – Lineo, Mamello, Makhosto and Limpho – Barali, meaning ‘daughters,’ works with governmental and nongovernmental institutions to fight for the inclusivity and freedom of women throughout Lesotho.

During our pre-pandemic in-person interviews in Nairobi, and through Skype calls during the pandemic and voice notes sent across oceans and continents, the Barali team highlighted the power of storytelling, of listening to people’s experiences and sharing them on social media. Through their campaign ‘Hear My Story,’ they collect and anonymously post stories from women across Lesotho, especially personal anecdotes about otherwise taboo topics such as seeking abortion in rural areas. This campaign gained enormous momentum on social media in Lesotho and beyond, touching many lives, encouraging other women to share their own stories. One of the stories they shared, a story about a nurse, her babysitter and sexual abuse, received 2,000 shares and over 3,000 comments – and has reached beyond Lesotho, getting international recognition in Botswana and South Africa.



Limpho Matlakala (Barali Foundation, Lesotho) at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.

The team believes their success depends on a set of shared values they hold for themselves, for their followers and for the women who share their stories. Lineo, Barali's Executive Director who manages the 'Hear My Story' campaign, is a wonderful storyteller herself, who is able to hold women's stories with such respect, dignity and integrity. As a team, they underscore the importance of confidentiality and consent.

When we think about the concept of informed consent in the West, we immediately think of signed consent forms. Usually, this is a bureaucratic process that provides institutional protection to the university or the institution in question. However, the kind of informed consent that Lineo describes is about respecting and caring for the person who shares their story, instead of a flattened, formalistic understanding of the term. It is about being committed to the way the person wants to be represented, being committed to their truth. It is about building trust through seeing the other individual and through communication, rather than merely protecting the organization. And for Barali Foundation, it is this trust their sisters have for them, the comfort and ease they feel in sharing their intimate stories that defines the success of their organization in forwarding social change in Lesotho.

“Make sure that you have consent – and not just from the person you are talking to. If the story that you are sharing involves others, do not use other people's names, or even hint where they work unless they are fully aware of both the sharing of the story and they have approved... [We take it seriously when] you are allowing us to share your story like that... it's the communication we have.”

— *Lineo Matlakala, July 2, 2020*

“FEELING THE PROBLEM”

Revolutionary change in Sudan has been made possible by organizations like the MANSAM network – experts in building alliances, within, through and across organizations, geographies and interests. During our in-person interviews, Afkar, Omima, Mazahir and Rasha – who are members of MANSAM – explained to us how the network was created by 18 civil society organizations, 8 women’s groups, two youth groups and individual grassroots activists. This impressive alliance was built through the resistance during the Sudanese Revolution in 2018-19 – in which women played a pivotal role – and they have been calling for the meaningful inclusion of women in Sudan’s government and the promotion of women and girls’ rights since then. **Afkar Nasser** explained:

Protests began in December 2018 as the Sudanese took to the streets over economic hardship, including this sharply rising cost of bread, shortage of food, and the limits on the bank, and throughout this social activists and organizations like us always looked to support and empower the women, and let them know about our rights. I can say we can be the voice of the voiceless. And as we believe in the power of the women, then they can fuel the revolution [...] So, we also tell them about how the way the government deals with the people is not the sensible way... The activists also told women that they are the voice, not just against the literal state, but also against the cultural and family restrictions and traditional society enforced by the conservative discourse and behavior [...] This is also the reason why [the women] were raising their voices, why they were in streets (July 3, 2020).

As Afkar, an activist based in Port Sudan City, explains, Sudanese women, who have been the backbone of the revolution, joined together to create alliances, through which they then rapidly built this large network with nimbleness, care and solidarity. They not only value building alliances within the network but also with local leaders, rural village heads or government officials to ensure the needs of the women and girls are met.



Sudanese women, who have been the backbone of the revolution, built a large network with nimbleness, care and solidarity.

Mazahir Ali Hassan describing her work in MANSAM network during the Peace Walls exercise at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.



Mazahir Ali Hassan, who works with an organization in Darfur, explained:

It is difficult to promote political, and social issues, because [talking about] the government is a sensitive issue. We're not allowed to talk about the participation and leadership of women within the government... So we implement our projects with our local authorities in Darfur and cooperate so that women [can] participate in the election.

Through this work, by building alliances with local leaders and government officials, our sisters talk about the challenges of working in alliances, especially with governmental institutions, yet they also provide insightful advice in how to deal with such difficult matters. During our WhatsApp voice note exchanges, Afkar talks about how we need to feel the problem first, to access our emotions in a way that allows us to transcend fixed, solution-oriented ways that are usually privileged (especially in the Global North), while engaging with stakeholders, as **Afkar explained:**

In fact, if you want my advice, if you really want to change anything, or solve any problem in the community, you have to let them feel it first. Let them feel this problem, talk about it. Give them the option of the possible solution, know the power of numbers, and also start with the active and effective people, [who] really help a lot.

Instead of having a fixed, symptom-focused, individualistic approach, which seems to be the dominant approach in the Global North, the MANSAM network builds their work on a holistic approach that values caring and feeling, not only for their communities and the women they work with, but also for the problems they face. They value solidarity, and they emphasize the need to form coalitions, to stand against oppression as one, across and within their vast network of organizations, activists and collectives.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

For our sisters in Uganda, having deep commitments to caring about girls and women they work alongside is also at the foundation of Suubi Center – Kibuku. As we hear Sylvia over voice notes from Kibuku, a rural district of Uganda, she describes the Suubi Center as a ‘girl and women empowerment organization,’ which takes a holistic approach towards the empowerment of women and girls, through a variety of activities, like community outreaches. They especially focus on educating the community about why girls drop out of school, and they identify menstrual health, gender-based violence and poverty as some key underlying reasons. To address these issues, the Suubi Center holds classes where they invite girls to talk about some of the common problems that they experience in their day-to-day life, including menstruation. They also hold one-on-one mentoring sessions where they listen to each girl and woman privately, for any issues they may feel uncomfortable with sharing in a group setting.

“In our outreaches,” Agnes said, “we try to counsel and educate girls and young women. We become friends with them, invite them to the Center for more counselling. This area I always handle. We see how we can help these girls, and be able to overcome peer pressure.”

The holistic approach Sylvia and Agnes describe is not only about taking into account the potential mental, social, economic, and other factors in understanding the girls’ school dropout, but it is also about understanding that everyone in the community is intimately interconnected. For example, the Suubi Center engages local leaders during their community outreaches, as they know they are key individuals in reaching girls in communities. They also spread information through girls who get sanitary pads from them, who in turn inform other girls with whom Suubi staff did not already have contact. And last but not



Agnes Ikasilon, Sylvia Katooko, and Sharon Mukade at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.

“In our outreaches, we try to counsel and educate girls and young women. We become friends with them, invite them to the Center for more counselling. This area I always handle. We see how we can help these girls, and be able to overcome peer pressure.”

– Agnes Ikasilon, August 3, 2020

least, they also include men and boys, teaching boys about menstruation and sanitary pads, so they can in turn teach their sisters:

On this holistic approach, Sharon shared: “We also try to involve the boys in the campaigns because they are also [have a part in this]. We tell the boys how to use reusable pads and we taught them how to go out and teach their sisters, so that we can remove this [stigma] and educate them with that skill in them – to tell them that menstruation is normal. This is also [to] encourage the girls in school... [and] to encourage the girls to be strong and to be very free. Right now, some of the boys even sew pads and give [them] to their sisters and for their daughters in the future” (August 3, 2020).

“Any advice I would like to give [to] other groups,” said Agnes, who served as a social worker with the Suubi Center, “is that they should consider educating girls, boys, the fathers and the mothers and the whole community about menstruation, as it is all part of the [life of the] girl child” (August 3, 2020)

For the Suubi Center, this is what a holistic approach looks like: involving everyone, not only girls and women, but everyone in the community, from local leaders, to brothers, husbands, to parents, because for our sisters in Uganda, social change will not happen unless everyone in the community believes in the value of girls and women.

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– Sharon Mukade, August 3, 2020



“LET THAT PERSON KNOW THAT YOU ARE COMING IN PEACE”

The Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), was created in 1985 at a conference of Muslim women in Nigeria. FOMWAN covers 36 states in Nigeria and has become an essential partner in civil society and recognized at the national level over the decades of activity.

FOMWAN works on five thematic areas: Da’wah or evangelical work, humanitarian services, health, education, and policy. For this piece, the FOMWAN team from the Plateau State Chapter – Muhibba Abdulrazaq, Kaltume Abubakar, and Kabirat Abdulrazaq – wanted to center on their interfaith expertise.

One strategy FOMWAN deploys is to co-organize events with local Christian organizations. Kaltume, their chapter vice president, tells us that “If people can see the Muslims and Christians as partners and organizing things together, that can go a long way to reduce the tension and to eradicate the hatred between the two religious groups.”

But to get to that phase, it is important to know the other religion. Kabirat, who is the chapter’s youth engagement coordinator, says, “Coming together as one and coming together to

exchange ideas, you get to know each religion is beautiful on its own, and you get to create a better avenue for understanding what the religion truly preaches." This process does not happen overnight, but rather through building relationships where we "get to know what we have in common."

Muhibba, the chapter president, gives similar advice: "You need to embrace my religion as I am: See me for who I am and accept me. Building trust is number one. You have to sell yourself to that person in a way that they see you are coming from peace. In a nutshell, we should allow ourselves to know that what binds us together is much more than what separates us."

Some skills and values transcend all faiths – and Kaltume shares with us that education and rights awareness are some of them: "Women should be educated to the level of her knowing her rights – in the sense that a woman should know her value." A second one is the necessity to unite across differences such as faith or generation: "Wherever [women] are, they should form a type of unity."

Besides coming in peace, Kabirat explains that "you make them see the beauty" (...) "you make people see the good." To be able to reach the other person, it's also essential to know both your religion very well and know the people you want to meet: "...you also need to know, are they knowledgeable? Are they also learned about the books? Not just illiterate and they don't know the religion themselves. You need to know your target, who you want to talk to, and how to approach them, then there will not be much problem."

"You need to embrace my religion as I am: See me for who I am and accept me. Building trust is number one. You have to sell yourself to that person in a way that they see you are coming from peace. In a nutshell, we should allow ourselves to know that what binds us together is much more than what separates us."

– Muhibba Abdulrazaq, July 8, 2020



"You make them see the beauty... you make people see the good."

Kabirat Abdulrazaq, July 8, 2020

Muhibba and Kabirat Abdulrazaq at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.

“EACH PERSON CAN DO SOMETHING”

Réseau des Femmes en Action pour le Développement Social (REFEADES) was created in 2011 in a community called Makobola, in the Fizi region in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Founded by a group of displaced, REFEADES was established to help women who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence during the ongoing conflict in the area.

In recent months, widespread flooding, leading to shortages and displacement, as well as the threat of COVID-19 became emergencies in the region. While Rose, Seya and Aline continue to work on this crucial topic, Rose, who is REFEADES’ deputy gender coordinator, shares that “we had to change our focus because you cannot take care of things [...] when there are problems that are here, present. We had to act on this.” For this piece, REFEADES focused on sharing about their program’s shift to focus on COVID-19 and addressing the environmental and social impacts of the pandemic and the floods with their expertise working in a rural area in conflict.

To respond to the threat of COVID-19 in their communities, REFEADES activists utilized sensitization programs to relay information from the government regarding social distancing, shelter-in-place measures, and new rules about gathering to prevent the spreading of the virus. REFEADES’ team modelled the prevention methods as a first step to teach, wearing masks at meetings, having soap available and limiting the number of people at gatherings. “Compliance with hygiene rules had to begin with ourselves,” Seya, who is a senior advisor to the organization, tells us. Schools and churches were closed due to the lockdown and it was not possible to have big groups – but reaching a majority of people was still necessary. In this regard, Rose explains their strategy: “What we did was to invite the leaders-- not everyone--to have a smaller group, and these leaders would then go to their own cities to do sensitizations.”



Rose Faida and Seya wa Mwilambwe describing their work with REFEADES during the Peace Walls exercise at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.

“We also wanted everyone to feel and be involved in the work and not only us: each person can do something to address our common problems.”

– Rose Faida, July 2, 2020

To address the issues related to the floods, REFEADES, in alliance with other local organizations, directly assessed the situation on the ground to know how the population was living, to evaluate the needs and estimate what could be done and what they could not do, particularly to aid women and their families who had been displaced by the flooding. "There were problems we could not address with sensitization," says Rose, "We called for a meeting with the other local organizations, and we created a committee to coordinate activities in the region and work on supervision."

When it became clear that REFEADES and other local organizations in the region could not address all the problems: "We decided to organize a meeting with the authorities. (...) We wanted to ask the authorities to do their job and take care of these women and children sleeping in schools. And we also needed mosquito nets for the victims of the flooding, and fields were flooded, they had no food." This is aligned with one of the main pieces of advice that REFEADES offers: "If you can't address some problems, ask the authorities to take their responsibilities." In this process of holding authorities accountable, they explain that the legitimacy of their own organization plays a key role.

The second important message from REFEADES is to find allies and "work in synergy: what you can't do, the other can help you with (...). We also wanted everyone to feel and be involved in the work and not only us: each person can do something to address our common problems."

DEEP COMMITMENTS

The incredible work of our sisters, their nimbleness in responding to local audiences as well as connecting with women across the globe, reveals deep commitments they have in doing such work.

As their sisters writing from the Global North, we started this piece to highlight the strategies our sisters use in their work, but over our transnational calls and messages, we realized their work reflects not 'strategies' in a narrow sense of how to do the work – but rather the deep commitments embedded in the work they do in their own communities, and the critical lessons for transnational solidarity we can distill.

Whether it is about thinking of consent as dignity and care (Barali), or in forming interfaith collaborations through empathy and care (Nigeria), honoring relationships and connection seems to lay the foundation of each organization's work. There is a constant refusal to turn anything into a technical answer, from 'feeling' governmental issues to access solutions that reach beyond symptom-focused solutions (MANSAM) to meaningfully involving each and every individual in the community in forwarding social change (Uganda).

For the complex "we" that harbors all our differences and diversities, our distinct histories and struggles, as well as our shared commitments, a moment of connection we found back in Nairobi turned into meaningful relationships and community, among those who were confronting unstable internet connections and government shutdowns, to others who had easy, unproblematic access to Internet.

We are humbled and honored by the deep commitments of African women activists in doing peace and security work. We, the 'we' that is writing from the Global North, have learned from African women's insistence on dignity and care across generations, religions and borders, and we are grateful for this vibrant transnational feminist solidarity that formed through our time together.



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Katia Henrys and Kabirat Abdulrazaq at the January 2020 Workshop in Nairobi. Photo by Natalia Mroz.



HONORING AGNES

We began our journey in Nairobi, sitting in a circle full of activist women, Leymah Gbowee had Caleb, Agnes' baby on her lap, and she initiated our very first gathering with the following words:

"We have our babies on our backs, still we navigate society and create social change."

Agnes was one such woman. She came to Nairobi with her baby Caleb on her back, and as a social worker, she listened to the problems, issues women and girls face in their communities, she prayed for them, she helped them, she told us their stories, she taught us her prayers, so we all prayed with her. She strived for social change, for the empowerment of women and girls and she has left an imprint on us with her whole being. We dedicate this piece in honor of her life and the deep commitments she brought to her own work.



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