

# Building Transnational Feminist Alliances: Reflections on the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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**Abstract:** This article reflects on transnational feminist organising by drawing on the experiences of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) during the consultations leading up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. First, we re-examine some of the debates that have shaped the field of women's rights, feminist activism and gender justice in Africa, and the enduring legacies of these discourses for policy advocacy. Second, we analyse the politics of movement-building and the influence of development funding, and how they shape policy discourses and praxis in respect of women's rights and gender justice. Third, we problematise the nature of transnational feminist solidarity. Finally, drawing on scholarship about transnational feminist praxis as well as activism, we distil some lessons for feminist policy advocacy across geo-political divides.

**Keywords:** Africa; feminism; transnational; movement-building; SDGs; advocacy.

## Introduction

This article focuses on the role of African feminist activism in the processes that led up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. FEMNET's experiences<sup>1</sup> are of interest because of its central role in mobilising the participation of African women in shaping the Post-2015 Development Agenda. While references to Africa may seem monolithic, this is not meant to suggest that histories and patterns of gendered experiences are shared across the continent. Instead, the term 'Africa' is used to refer to a geo-political construct and a political bloc organised around the African Union (AU), and our analysis of transnational feminist organisation occurs in this frame.

Within the AU setting, there is a stream of organisations advancing policy agendas relating to women and girls across various African countries. The AU becomes the place

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within which various national and community-based organisations cascade national and sub regional policy demands. Policy advocates derive their mandates for working in global policy spaces, specifically UN-led processes, from local (community), national, and regional (African) engagement, and FEMNET is one such pan-African network.

In examining the politics of feminist organising at the regional and global level, our objective is not to restate what we already know – that FEMNET is not representative of the continent as a whole – but to tease out the dynamics that shape and influence this advocacy on an intra-African and transnational basis, and the lessons that emerge for transnational movement-building praxis.

We draw on an understanding of transnational feminism as movements that strive to liberate themselves from the political and intellectual constraints of international and global feminisms (see Nagar and Swarr 2010). Some of these constraints are associated with a rigid adherence to nation-state borders, an inadequate recognition of the forces of globalisation, and the contradictions and dangers this holds for any feminist project. Consequently, transnational collaboration is not only about concrete strategies or models, but also about ethical dilemmas, conceptual difficulties, and opportunities to rethink the transnational feminist frameworks that disrupt the prevailing North/South dichotomies (see Nagar and Swarr 2010).

In examining FEMNET's experiences, this article illuminates the changes and continuities in relation to development discourses and their impact in transforming or sustaining certain interpretations of global feminisms. Our aim is not to focus on changes that FEMNET, its partners and its allies pursued in certain policy spaces; rather, we are interested in the contours of movement-building at a time of robust debates about the nature of global feminisms. How much has changed, and how much has remained the same?

To this end, this article is organised around two major themes. The first offers a history of FEMNET through an analysis of gender discourses, and how they have influenced the organisation's work. This history is useful as it unpacks the power contestations in gender and development discourses, and how they come to life in FEMNET. The second examines the political demands that were mobilised, the institutional spaces in which this happened, and how they help us to understand the tensions in and among global and African transnational organisations.<sup>2</sup>

## **Building a pan-African women's platform**

FEMNET is a pan-African network encompassing 600 individual and institutional members in 43 African countries as well as the diaspora, which seeks to amplify the voices of African women and advance women's rights. It traces its origins to preparations for the Third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, aimed at reviewing progress made during the UN Women's Decade, and forging forward-looking strategies (FEMNET 2012a: 12-15). The network was formally registered as a regional non-governmental organisation (NGO) in 1992, with a secretariat based in Nairobi, Kenya. It gained renewed momentum prior to the fourth world conference on women held in Beijing, China, in 1995 (FEMNET 2012a: 12-15).

FEMNET continues to base its work on its initial mandate of providing strategic information to regional and international policy processes relevant to African women. It also seeks to ensure that African women contribute to the negotiating processes from which these regional and international policies arise (see Wanyeki 2005; FEMNET 2012a). In this regard, FEMNET has prioritised the annual sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as well as the AU as important global and regional advocacy spaces.

To this end, FEMNET is a founding member and steering committee member of Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), a continental network that led to the development, adoption and now ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the Maputo Protocol<sup>3</sup> (see Wanyeki 2005; FEMNET 2012a). Advocacy around the protocol remains a central feature of FEMNET's work at the AU and in African countries. In addition, the UN CSW and other international development platforms organised around thematic conferences designed to advance women's rights have also been central to FEMNET's pursuit of a global feminist policy agenda. These include the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which has focused on women's sexual and reproductive health rights, as well as high-level forums on financing for development.

As a membership network on a culturally and linguistically diverse continent, FEMNET has encountered and continues to navigate the challenges of building transnational networks that survive beyond issue-based campaigns. Three of these challenges are particularly relevant. The first is the assumption that work on gender and the rights of women are based on a shared vision of the equality of African women. FEMNET contends with tensions caused by the assertion that the pursuit of certain women's rights are elite-based concerns (see Wanyeki 2005). The term 'elite' is often used as a placeholder for 'foreign,' pointing to externally generated interests that are disconnected from the 'real needs of women on the ground'. Some of the perennial issues involve sexual and reproductive health rights, particularly around abortion, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity. The 'women on the ground' are rural or peri-urban women whose needs are perceived to differ from those of urban women, due to geographical distance from state services as well as class differences. However, it is worth emphasising here that rural is not synonymous with poor, and that class concerns are additional to and should not be conflated with geographical location.

While the charge of elitism cannot be dismissed wholesale, it mirrors gender discourses generated by the development ecosystem, which determines who the targets of 'development' are and where they are located, resulting in a homogenisation of the 'poor,' underprivileged and underserved. These global development discourses have been criticised by Mohanty (2002), joined by Oyewumi (1997, 2002), Lazreg (1994, 2002) and Mama (2001), who question the homogenisation of 'women in the third world' and the assumptions that follow about how gender operates in those contexts. These scholars are interested in the discourses produced by the distinctions between the global North and South, particularly in their construction of universalised subjects, namely 'African women,' who are always acted upon and not acted with. The production of 'Third World

women' as the collective 'Other' through universal categories that position them as 'poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, and victimised' overlooks the complex and interconnected set of factors that produce 'women' as a category.

In response to this framing, Win (2004: 3) challenges the construction of an 'African woman' narrative that ignores class, ethnicity and religion, some of the factors that shape the positions of women in any given context. She argues that being an educated African feminist working as a policy advocate is made difficult when the only African woman presented as having a 'legitimate voice' is a 'grass-roots woman' who is perpetually poor, powerless and pregnant. She joins Nagar and Swarr (2010) in questioning whose interests are served in permanently freezing groups of women into a powerless position, in a way that prohibits any transition out of this position in turn.

The second challenge is connected to explicitly identifying an organisation as feminist. The term 'feminism' is viewed as distinct from women's rights or gender, and often as a foreign export mobilised by elite women unconcerned with 'bread and butter issues.' These critiques of feminism as Western and alien to the African context have denounced all feminisms as imperialist, and erased from memory the long histories of women's resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies (Lewis 2004). These arguments have also been mobilised by African heads of state with the intention of homogenising African women, and retreating to an uncritical, 'untainted' African culture that eschews gender equality. Mikell (1997), for instance, argues that contemporary gender inequality in Africa is primarily the result of 'traumatic colonisation by the West,' as African women were fully integrated into precolonial social structures. This historical precolonial integration is often invoked as part of African cultural norms and practices. These discourses on 'African culture' emerge out of the historical condition of colonialism, with African cultural theory concentrating on challenging imperialist cultural domination (see Wilson-Tagoe 2003). This outwardly directed posture has minimised attention to the internal dynamics of cultural struggle and change that did not always produce gender equality (see Mama 1996).

Given that FEMNET was established during a period of democratic contestation across Africa, not least in Kenya, where it was seeking registration, it had to deal with these discourses. Part of the posture of ruling elites during times of internal dissent is to create binaries about 'us' (Africa) and 'them' (the West) by projecting a coherent and homogeneous notion of African culture, including democratic culture. In this setting, women's rights invariably become sites of national contestation. As Kandiyoti (1991: 421) observes:

Nationalist movements invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interrelating them as 'national' actors: mothers, educators, workers, and even fighters. On the other hand, they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct, and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by nationalist discourse.

The contestations described above have produced globalised and essentialised discourses about women. McFadden (2016) notes that the normative use of gender has led to a move away from its function as a framework for understanding the sites of systemic in-

visibility and powerlessness inhabited by women's lives and narratives. He argues that contemporary approaches to addressing gender inequalities result in selective choices which deliberately silence women and push them to the margins of their societies. Besides pushing rights regarded as radical (such as abortion) and groups regarded as marginal (such as queer movements) to the periphery of advocacy agendas, it has also led to NGO-isation. This is illustrated by FEMNET's journey in the face of external pressures to develop a programming approach with distinct portfolios that could be funded to sustain a pan-African solidarity network. NGO-isation is the product of an external environment that has converted a debate on structural inequalities into projects and activities (see FEMNET 2012a: 38-39). NGO-isation and its attendant constraints on achieving gender equality are exemplified by the third challenge.

One of FEMNET's objectives is to play a catalytic role in respect of women's rights concerns which African states and global nations are unable or unwilling to address. However, like many other African CSOs, FEMNET contends with limited funding, which affects its ability to deliver a robust social justice response that cuts across the continent. As Wanyeki (2005) notes:

The question is whether an African women's movement – or any other African social movement – can be timely, and indeed viable, when forced to frame both proactive and reactive initiatives into programmes and projects which ensure that there is money and personnel to do what needs to be done.

Scholars and practitioners have reflected on the nature of development funding. Funding agencies generally claim to be setting up self-reliant organisations, yet there is a continued emphasis on funding short-term projects that produce quick and measurable results (Smith 1997: 229). This has resulted in a development funding discourse that 'locks those located within it into a tightly regulated set of relations defined by the international marketplace and foreign aid' (Smith 1997: 229). Those who suggest that recipients of funding should 'do development' on their own terms are regarded as dangerous, because they upset the balance of power that positions the aid industry as knowers and helpers (Smith 1997: 229).

In 2013, the Association of Women's Rights in Development published a global study which showed that the median income for women's rights organisations was UD\$20 000. This was in a context where the visibility of women and girls in mainstream development processes was gaining ground (see Arutyunova and Clark 2013). This trend is shaped by growing corporate interests in social justice work. Funding is directed towards corporate social responsibility initiatives run directly by corporates, with social entrepreneurship portrayed as the 'silver bullet' for addressing gender inequality. The Coca Cola Foundation and Goldman Sachs, among others, have advanced this approach by coining slogans such as: 'Women invest 90% of their wealth in family and communities'; and 'If US businesses were their own country, they would produce the fifth largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the world' (BABSON 2016: 9-10). 'Women as the next economic frontier' appears to be an inclusive growth strategy, but one shaped by the value of women to the

economy, and therefore to GDP. ‘Womenomics’ encourages investment in women based on their value to communities. It is less about the need to transform the structural factors underpinned by patriarchy that place women on the margins.

FEMNET’s history and the three challenges outlined above frame the reflections and arguments in this article around the intersecting political, economic and social factors that show up in transnational global feminist work. This brief history illustrates that FEMNET is not immune to or cushioned from the larger arena that shapes development discourses, resources and work. These continuities and legacies from 1985, when the idea for the network first emerged, shape the discussion below.

## **The post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs**

The adoption in September 2015 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),<sup>4</sup> marked the end of global consultations, lobbying and negotiations about what would come after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted in 2000, the MDGs had become a central reference point for global development efforts. As the first inclusive global vision for ending poverty, they achieved unprecedented success in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority (see Fukuda-Parr 2012). Among other things, they were effective because they managed to compress the complex challenges of development into eight goals and sets of concrete subsidiary targets. By 2015, the MDGs had become a key feature of the development aid architecture created in the late 1990s (FEMNET 2012b).

The MDGs were criticised for their focus on quantity rather than quality, thus reducing the development agenda to meeting basic material needs, and stripping away the Millennium Declaration’s vision for development with social justice and human rights (see Fukuda-Parr 2012; UNECA 2012; UNDESA et al 2012). However, there was consensus around the interconnectedness of development goals, with key linkages across education, health, poverty reduction, and gender equality, with improvements in one area having a positive effect on the others (ECE et al 2012; Grown et al 2005).

In contrast with the MDG process, the post-2015 process relied on extensive global consultations, which was actively seized upon by civil society organisations in different parts of the world. Moreover, the consultations about a ‘global development compact’ were framed by the recognition that countries differed in political and economic terms, resulting in phrases such as ‘equal but differentiated responsibility.’ Germany and Mali could not be expected to deliver on the same level, and make the same financial commitments. Stakeholders also recognised that structural inequalities contributed to the inclusion or exclusion of people based on age, gender, class, and location, resulting in the phrase ‘leave no one behind.’

However, while recognising differentiated responsibility and structural inequality, the post-2015 development debate became increasingly populated by corporate actors. Concerns about growing corporate and religious interests in international policy-making and therefore covert neoliberal and conservative agendas were articulated through

transnational feminist critiques and demands for greater accountability (see AWID 2013; FEMNET 2013). FEMNET played a leading role in helping diverse groups of African women's rights actors to participate in the international and continental processes that led to the SDGs. In what follows, we reflect on the politics of transnational organising and the lessons they hold for feminist work as a means of deconstructing the power relations that have historically shaped relations between the global North and South.

## **Building momentum for African feminist engagement with the SDGs**

In April, 2012, FEMNET convened an informal meeting with a few African women's rights organisations on the margins of the AWID forum in Istanbul, Turkey. Participants in the meeting agreed that FEMNET should take the lead in ensuring that the needs of African women were accounted in the processes determining the post-2015 Development Agenda. In collaboration with other key African organisations working at a multi-country level, FEMNET played two key roles. The first was to develop research papers and policy briefs that would offer feminist analyses of the performance of the MDGs, and suggest feminist priorities for a subsequent development compact. The second was to mobilise African women to engage with the post-2015 process, and inform its outcome.

To deliver on these two roles, FEMNET invited a few regional and sub regional organisations to participate in a task force<sup>5</sup> aimed at ensuring the participation of others beyond its own membership. The choice of members was based on regional coverage and the longevity of working on women's rights in the identified sub regions, namely Southern Africa, Eastern Africa and West Africa. The task force had two major assignments. The first was to develop a common position based on lessons learnt from the MDGs, and to use this as a basis for recommendations to policy-makers. The position paper *Mind the Gap* (FEMNET 2012b) informed most of the advocacy that followed. The second was to co-convene a wider regional consultation and strategy meeting for women's rights organisations working at national and local levels, to generate further input into the position paper.

Beyond the task force, FEMNET engaged with women's movements in Africa and globally, as well as CSOs, coalitions and movements that did not specifically work on gender justice, including the Africa CSO Group on the Post 15 Development Agenda.<sup>6</sup> It also attended other meetings and conferences that played a vital role in determining the 2030 Agenda, thus serving as spaces for mobilising collective policy positions. These included the Beijing +20 Review, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Beyond 20 Review, and the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. Held in Africa, these gatherings coincided with the AU-led consultations about the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the AU's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and the development of *Agenda 2063*, Africa's development blueprint.

A determination to speak with one voice led to the development of a Common Africa Position (AU 2014). In addition, some of the key actors leading the Post-2015 Development Agenda process were Africans. For example, the president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, co-chaired the high-level panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda appointed



by the UN Secretary General; Amina Mohammed of Nigeria advised the Secretary General on the agenda; and Kenya's Ambassador to the UN, Macharia Kamau, co-facilitated the UN Open Working Group, and co-chaired the final negotiations. Efforts were made to participate in key regional meetings, develop a shared women's rights position, and build strategic partnerships with key African institutions and officials involved in the discussions. Meetings with women's rights organisations were held in Monrovia, Liberia, in October 2012 ahead of the Africa consultations led by Sirleaf, and in Addis Ababa in 2013.

Outside Africa, the initial discussions among women's rights organisations were led by the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign, aimed at spearheading the establishment of UNWomen. FEMNET, a founding member of the GEAR committee, was active in these initial discussions. There were debates about the value of spending time, money and effort on engaging with the Post-2015 Development Agenda, given that the UN system was unlikely to produce a truly transformative agenda that would respond to the needs and interests of all people. This position changed in early 2013 at a meeting convened by GEAR during the UN CSW, resulting in an agreement that led to the dismantling of the GEAR campaign and the creation of a Post-2015 Women's Coalition. FEMNET became a founding member of the steering committee, charged with continuing the mobilisation of women in Africa.

However, a parallel coalition with similar goals existed in the form of the Women's Major Group (WMG), which was created during the Rio +20 for Sustainable Development process. When the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Rio +20 process were merged, the WMG continued to play an active role. It had an official seat in the open working group<sup>7</sup> and had speaking slots, albeit brief, allocated to it. Tensions developed between these two groups due to the lack of clarity about the differences in their mandates. Meetings were held to discuss how the two groups could build on each other's strengths. Whereas the WMG was strategically positioned within the Post-2015 Development Agenda process, the Post-2015 Women's Coalition concentrated on building a stronger global women's movement with a focus on women in the global South beyond the post-2015 process.

The Post-2015 Women's Coalition was housed by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, which focuses on strengthening Southern and therefore African feminist connections. It is also relevant to note that the coalition emerged from the GEAR campaign, which grew from a conversation about reconceptualising the UN, and the place of gender equality within such a reformed organisation. Members of both groups adopted a pragmatic and therefore tactical position, namely to keep the greater goal in mind of achieving specific outcomes within the post-2015 development process.

Although, FEMNET was a founding member of the Post-2015 Women's Coalition, it understood the strategic position of the WMG because it could make direct input into the open working group, and engage with the co-facilitators of the UN process. FEMNET therefore became an active member of WMG without joining its leadership structure. Remaining in both groups meant double work, placing additional pressure on an organisation with limited capacity.



The Post-2015 Coalition has become the Feminist Alliance for Rights (FAR), which continues efforts to build a global feminist movement. However, it is struggling with limited resources, which hampers its coordination and mobilising capacity. This constraint may be attributed to the fact that funding agencies do not see the need to fund movements that are not directly involved in influencing specific policy processes, or implementing specific projects.

## **The politics of transnational movement-building**

The three-year consultation process outlined above provided important lessons for FEMNET, specifically about transnational feminist praxis. In the section that follows, we analyse these lessons in two broad areas. The first involves the politics of building effective coalitions, and the associated labour. The second involves the global/local dynamics associated with transnational feminist organisation as well as the global North/South divide, as explored by Lazreg (2002) and Mohanty (2002), among others, and which continues in global movement-building activities today.

### *Feminist labour and movement-building*

The establishment of a task force to organise and sustain African-based consultation and mobilisation around the Post 2015 Development Agenda was intended to ensure inclusivity, a division of labour, and broad-based representation. While FEMNET is a pan-African network, it was vital to ensure that diverse interests and viewpoints were represented, and that the process should not be perceived as driven solely by FEMNET. However, as with most collective processes, FEMNET did most of the work. Other task force members became inactive, and did not follow through on agreed tasks. Besides being asked to convene the task force, FEMNET saw this work as part of its mandate, even though it did not form part of its annual work plan or strategic plan. It viewed the post-2015 process as a strategic opportunity that should not be ignored. Given that this was not an activity that had been budgeted for, FEMNET had to raise additional funds. These collective pressures on FEMNET meant that there was limited time to keep the collective work going. The dispersed nature of the task force resulted in more energy spent on negotiating with other African women's rights organisations about consolidated positions that could be presented to policy-makers. These protracted negotiations were necessitated by the failure of active participation in the task force where consensus could have been built.

While there was consensus on most collective positions, the main disagreement occurred around sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly access to safe abortion. Linked to this were contestations around sexual orientation, comprehensive sexuality education, women's choices around HIV testing, and the sexual rights of women living with HIV. The disagreements were framed around the assertion that these issues were not a priority in Africa, despite the existing policy commitments in the Maputo Protocol. A case in point was the ICPD Beyond 2014 Review process<sup>8</sup> when language about sexual orientation and gender identity stalled negotiations among member states.

It is worth returning to McFadden (2003) to historicise why these remain vexed areas. She argues against the proclivity of feminist work in Africa to engage with the 'safer' zones of sexuality, notably the overwhelming focus on reproduction and reproductive rights (specifically within marriage). Instead, McFadden (2003) sees pleasure and choice as a vital part of sexuality, noting that the erotic and the agency associated with claiming it, is a powerful tool for countering the silences in sexuality discourses in women's rights spaces in Africa. McFadden (2003) therefore challenges the use of universalised cultural narratives about 'African women' who seek an acceptable package of rights within the confines of male privilege and patriarchy. In effect, she believes that such approaches do not dismantle the pillars of patriarchy, but merely shift them to make room for 'respectable' women and girls.

The dominance of respectability politics when connected to gender discourses appeared in the broader collaboration with CSOs. Collaboration with African CSOs came with a set of challenges, ranging from substantive gender representational issues through insisting on women's rights concerns being included in the policy recommendations/communiqués, to minimal recognition of inputs made by women's rights advocates. For example, during the first Africa-wide CSO consultation in Monrovia, Liberia in 2013, predominantly men CSOs representatives constantly denied women's rights organisations representation on a panel with the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This contest around space occurred even though FEMNET and its partners had convened a two-day meeting prior to the regional consultation to develop and consolidate policy demands which were collated in a communiqué. Following intensive negotiations, FEMNET and its partners were 'allowed' to read the communiqué at the beginning of the meeting, and to have one person speak from the floor during the panel discussion. This stance reinforced reigning gender power relations despite the assertion that all CSOs were pursuing social justice and equality for all. It reinforces the idea that women's rights concerns are tertiary to larger developmental questions.

Connected to creating equitable room in transnational organising lies a perennial issue at the heart of movement-building today, namely intergenerational organising. The conversation about intergenerational organising circulates in African feminist spaces in three main ways. The first is through debates about youth-hood, and how this shapes people's experiences of the world. Part of the argument here is that the views of young women and girls are important, and can only be articulated by them. Secondly, the gender and youth-hood debate is complicated by the dominant construction of youth-hood as a gender-neutral category, which results in youth spaces being dominated by young men, thus replicating gender power relations (see FRIDA et al n.d.). Consequently, young women regard feminist spaces as sites that should guarantee equitable participation, and not as sites of struggle.

The third way in which intergenerational debates circulate is through conversations about experience and age. The demand for space by young women and gender non-conforming people are viewed as emerging from an older generation that values age and experience as the basis for earning the right to occupy leadership positions in intergenerational

movements. Young women and girls are constructed as having limited experience, and therefore have no legitimate claim to speak. In addition, some responses to young women demanding space note that young women activists tend to ignore the historical work done by feminist activists in Africa, thus running the risk of repeating mistakes already made, or seeking to reinvent the wheel.

FEMNET had to manage the contestations around intergenerational organising even though its secretariat was staffed by young women. It countered the participation deficit by ensuring that young women were part of organising committees, and speakers on panels. However, there was a broader challenge that brought home the nexus between youth, gender and sexuality, namely the rampant sexual harassment faced by young women advocates, which created a hostile environment for effective advocacy. During the ICPD Beyond 2014 regional ministerial meeting, the extent of sexual advances from men ministers and experts prompted a group of women to start a social media campaign against sexual harassment in the AU policy advocacy arena. The campaign attracted the attention of policy-makers.

An older African woman who was part of civil society asked Dinah Musindarwezo why they had started a campaign that was causing embarrassment for policy-makers. Were the sexual harassment claims genuine? In response, Musindarwezo spoke about her experiences of sexual harassment, those she had witnessed, and others she had been informed about. The woman then shared her own experiences of sexual harassment as a younger policy advocate, but argued that she thought they were a thing of the past.

Cumulatively, the tensions described above that were prominent in transnational organising in Africa were mirrored in global advocacy, albeit through a different set of power relations. The next section of this article focuses on this.

### *G/local feminisms*

At the global level, FEMNET based its movement-building work on membership of the Women's Major Group (WMG) and the Post-2015 Women's Coalition. Initially, African women were poorly represented in these coalitions. At some meetings, FEMNET was the only African organisation present. This meant that in most cases there was only one African woman present apart from a few who worked for organisations based in the global North, and who therefore had to foreground the mandates of their organisations and portfolios. The paucity of African women was due to financial and time constraints of travelling to New York, where most of the negotiations took place every month. Inadequate funding also meant that organisations such as FEMNET had limited core (non-project) funding for recruiting staff that could sustain advocacy at the regional and global level.

It is often difficult to convince donors to resource regional and global advocacy. FEMNET was often asked to explain how advocacy helps women and girls living in poverty. Some donors expressed the belief that regional and global advocacy was based on issues that affected elite women only, and not the women who most needed support. In

addition, there is a perception among donors that what African women need most is capacity-building, which determines how funding is allocated.

The degree to which women's rights organisations remain underfunded and understaffed has been captured most prominently through AWID's efforts to track funding for women's rights (see Arutyunova et al 2013). Under-resourcing is compounded by project-based funding that restricts organisations to activity-based work, leaving little room to respond to advocacy opportunities that are often not planned or budgeted for. This results in a situation where organisations located in the global South, in this case Africa, are forced to choose between fund-raising to sustain organisations and ongoing work on the one hand, and capitalising on important policy-shaping opportunities that will ultimately have a major impact on their work and institutional survival on the other. This financial conundrum generates a dynamic in which African women's rights organisations are reliant on Northern institutions to fund their participation in global-level advocacy, as was the case in respect of the Post 2015 Development Agenda. This support does not come automatically. This only became an area of concern once FEMNET had pointed it out. FEMNET constantly reminded the WMG and the Post-2015 Women's Coalition that the physical participation of African women was essential.

A few feminist organisations in the global North provided some financial support to enable African women to participate in the New York consultations, but these resources were limited and highly competitive, thus limiting participation. The transnational complications of global feminist organising were also present in migration and visa regimes, time zone differences, and diverse communication infrastructures, which continued to hamper participation even when limited money for travel was available. In a context in which historical power dynamics have shaped who speaks for whom, when and how, some New York-based processes ended up being driven by Northern partners. Consequently, there were high expectations for FEMNET to 'represent' African women and to offer expertise on all issues. This was impossible, given that the small team in the FEMNET secretariat had specific expertise and, given the geo-political complexities alluded to above, could not be expected to respond to every issue, and to do so with the necessary speed.

Perhaps one of the clearest manifestations of the replication of 'Africa' as a monolith lay in the expectation that FEMNET and other African women's rights organisations would successfully influence the Africa Group<sup>2</sup> during the negotiations. When the Africa Group<sup>9</sup> advanced conservative positions, it was argued that FEMNET and others had not done enough to influence 'our governments.' The assumption was that geo-political dynamics did not influence the Africa group's position, and that individual countries were not making decisions based on what they considered to be integral to their national sovereignty, which as Kandiyoti (1991) points out, often involves sacrificing women's rights.

Finally, women's rights organisations based in the global North, especially those with offices in New York, were at an advantage due to their proximity to the policy-makers leading the negotiations. The result was that the priorities of New York-based organisations received more attention, and informed what feminists pushed for in New York. Some issues affecting African women were overlooked. For example, in one caucus, a

white feminist declared that female genital mutilation (FGM) was an issue of the past. This view was contested by African women activists who came from areas where FGM remains prevalent, and remains a key area for the control of women's bodily autonomy. It was quickly agreed that this was one of the issues that would be pushed for. There were also disagreements about structural issues such as international trade, international tax policy, illicit financial flows, and debt, especially when the third International Conference on Financing for Development merged with the Post-2015 Development Agenda as its means of implementation. These issues were opposed by governments in the global North, yet were crucial to the global South. Feminists from the global South shared analyses that emphasised unequal global financial infrastructure as a key driver of inequalities between developed and developing countries, and the resultant gendered impact (see DAWN 2013; AWID 2013). Feminist organisations in the global North seemed ambivalent about these issues, and did not advocate with their governments, yet we perceived them as gender equality allies. However, individual feminist activists in organisations in the global North worked closely with women's rights networks in Africa to advance these priorities.

Two conclusions can be derived from this experience. The first is the persistence of a siloed approach to thinking about gender inequality in a context where robust feminist analysis around structural inequality was available. The second is that Northern feminist organisations chose to work on feminist questions that other CSOs would not focus on, thereby leaving the larger debates about financing, which mattered greatly to African feminists, to mainstream CSOs. This disconnect might have contributed to the absence of strong commitments to addressing these issues in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have reflected on FEMNET's participation in enhancing the participation of African women in the Post-2015 Development Agenda as a basis for assessing the complexities of achieving solidarity across multiple boundaries. The transnational feminist praxis required to generate the outcomes regarded as gender equality gains within the SDGs raised questions about how to enact solidarities across nations, institutions, socio-political identifications, and economic categories (see Nagar and Swarr 2010). We have thought through these complex intersections by drawing on an understanding of reflexive transnational feminism as one that foregrounds the contradictions and dangers inherent in feminist processes where 'difference' is based on external standards, and therefore an external frame of reference. Some of these differences include Africa vis-à-vis the developed world, the global South vis-à-vis the global North, African women vis-à-vis white Western women, and African women vis-à-vis African men.

FEMNET's history demonstrates an acute awareness of how difference plays out in transnational solidarity, even where there appears to be a shared sense of identity, namely African. These politics of difference are intimately connected to and catalysed by the politics of authenticity – who is perceived as having a legitimate voice, and a claim to a

specific issue. In development lingo, this is often articulated as ‘nothing about us without us.’ However, these slogans that rightly emphasise agency and voice cannot be examined without recognising how race, class and heteronormative logics work to sustain differential power hierarchies that also appear in transnational solidarity projects. Finding strategies for tackling the structural inequalities that hamper mutually beneficial transnational work is a far more complex task, which this article has not set out to address. However, we note that by ignoring interlocking oppressions, transnational movements and transnational solidary work can entrench monolithic ideas of how ‘African’ women can and should participate in international spaces.

Global transnational relationships must therefore be consistently attentive to how power and privilege are exercised, and who occupies space, defines agendas, and therefore shapes solidarity work. At a basic level, this requires attentiveness to how feminists who are not located in the global North would like to define the partnerships and collaborations necessary for a collective agenda. This includes revisiting the assumption that African women and their organisations need capacity-building. This is especially vital in a context in which resources for movement building are scarce, yet donors and international NGOs prefer to earmark resources for capacity-building. This means that well-meaning feminist actors in the global North cannot escape the geo-political context in which their work is implicated and produced. Therefore, their ally-ship must be grounded in unpacking their relative privilege, and ensuring that this is not reproduced in partnerships with organisations in Africa.

While there have been shifts in the development discourse about the agency of African women, development resources flowing predominantly from the global North to the global South continues to restrain African women’s agency in practice. A skewed development funding framework consistently places Southern CSOs at the mercy of the global North. Yet, the global North now finds itself in unknown territory in which the very problems that have historically been framed as entrenched in ‘Africa’s DNA’ are now problems at ‘home’ – from stolen elections to sexual violence, the closure of civic space, and rising fundamentalist regimes. An opportunity exists to move the conversation about solidarity, alliances and transnational organising outside the frame of financial resources and capacity-building to one that focuses on geo-political feminist solidarity as a site of collaboration. The threats to freedom, justice, bodily autonomy and the integrity of sexuality are now everywhere, and led by state actors. Freedom and justice have no geographic home. This means that how we conceive of freedom and justice based on our shared understanding of global inequality ought to be the starting point for our collective work.

Some of the efforts to reconfigure money as a factor that shapes power relations in transnational solidarity have been made through activism about shifting the funding ecosystem (see Arutyunova and Clark 2013). This has emerged from a recognition that money is an important political resource, and that financial resources flowing from the global North are not a favour to countries in the global South, but the product of a range of unequal historical and contemporary political and economic relationships. These include skewed international financial systems, a capitalist economic system that benefits a few

wealthy people and companies at the expense of the majority, and the power that comes with attaching conditionalities to development and bilateral funding. Transforming the funding ecosystem is a conversation about power, and an acknowledgement that dismantling patriarchy requires the transformation of other interlocking systems, namely capital and race.

This global moment also requires an inward-facing approach. FEMNET's work with the AU as a regional bloc and as a site of policy advocacy points to a shift in the locus of power, aided by the growing disintegration of the global political terrain since the advent of the Trump presidency. In simple terms, Africa can define, shape and resource its own agenda, as demonstrated by the AU's Agenda 2063, which formed the basis for Africa's negotiating position in the post-2015 development process. In this regard, African feminist activists engaging in global policy spaces need to shape the discourse, recognising that this is an act of reclaiming a space of power that has historically privileged the Global North.

## Notes

- 1 This article is based on the experiences of Dinah Musindarwezo, the former executive director of FEMNET, who steered its work in respect of the SDGs. Her co-author, Awino Okech, was involved in the post-2015 consultation processes as a consultant and contributes an insider/outsider perspective.
- 2 The authors would like to acknowledge additional reflections by Nebila Abdulmelik and Yvette Kathurima, both of whom worked with FEMNET during the post-2015 process, as well as Irene Kagoiya of AMwA.
- 3 The AU adopted this protocol on 11 July 2003 at its second summit in Maputo, Mozambique. It entered into force on 25 November 2005, after having been ratified by the required 15 member states. To date, 49 of 54 member states have signed the protocol, and 37 have ratified and deposited it. The Protocol is aimed at upholding, protecting and promoting women's rights in Africa, among others by committing states to doing so. It enumerates a broad range of women's rights, including the elimination of discrimination against women, the right to dignity, the right to life, the integrity and security of the person, the protection of women in armed conflicts, the right to education and training, economic and social welfare rights and health and reproductive rights (Wandia n.d.).
- 4 The 17 SDGs and 169 subsidiary targets build on the MDG, and are aimed at completing what those did not achieve. They seek to realise the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible, and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.
- 5 The task force included Gender Links, Akina Mama wa Africa, the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Women in Law and Development, and the Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative (EASSI).
- 6 They included Oxfam, ACORD, the Africa Public Health Alliance, Africa Monitor, the Pan Africa Climate Justice Alliance, Beyond 2015, and FEMNET.
- 7 The UN General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) had 30 seats which were shared by 70 representatives of member states. The creation of the OWG was mandated by the Rio+20 Outcome Document, tasked with preparing a report containing a proposal on a set of SDGs which address the three dimensions of sustainable development (social, environmental, economic) in a balanced way. The OWG's final report was completed in July 2014.
- 8 The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994 resulted in a global consensus that placed individual dignity and human rights, including the right to plan one's family, at the heart of development. Twenty years later, the comprehensive ICPD Beyond 2014 Review



overwhelmingly supported the notion that investing in individual human rights, capabilities and dignity – across multiple sectors and through the life course – is the foundation of sustainable development. In September 2014, a Special Session of the UN General Assembly endorsed the findings of the 20-year review, and UN member states committed themselves to intensified efforts to address gaps and emerging challenges.

- 9 The Africa Group is one of numerous UN Regional Groups. It has the most member states, namely 54. It is the only regional group whose territory coincides with the continent connected to its name.

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## Construindo Alianças Feministas Transnacionais: Reflexões sobre a Agenda de Desenvolvimento Pós-2015

**Resumo:** Este artigo oferece reflexões sobre a natureza contemporânea da mobilização e organização feminista transnacional. Estas reflexões baseiam-se nas experiências da Rede de Mulheres Africanas de Desenvolvimento e Comunicação (FEMNET) de advocacia global e africana durante consultas sobre o desenvolvimento da Agenda 2030 para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável das Nações Unidas (ONU), incluindo os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS). Nós nos baseamos nas experiências da FEMNET de três maneiras. Um, para reexaminar alguns dos debates que moldaram o campo dos direitos das mulheres, o ativismo feminista ou a justiça de gênero na África e os legados duradouros desses discursos na advocacia política hoje. Dois, para analisar as políticas de construção do movimento, a influência do financiamento do desenvolvimento e como elas moldam discursos políticos e práxis sobre os direitos das mulheres e a justiça de gênero. Finalmente, problematizar a natureza da solidariedade feminista transnacional. Através dessas reflexões, pretendemos estabelecer conexões entre a bolsa de estudos sobre práxis feminista transnacional e o ativismo para destacar as lições que surgem de uma análise retrospectiva do que significa engajar-se na defesa de políticas feministas através de divisões geopolíticas.

**Palavras-chave:** África; feminismo; transnacional; construção de movimentos; ODS; advocacy.

*Received on 4 February 2018, and approved for publication on 20 March 2019.*



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