



Transnational Solidarity Playbook | Essay

This essay is part of a series that will be included in a [Transnational Solidarity Playbook](#) to be published by the US-Africa Bridge Building Project. The series is based on the premise that progressive forces must increase our capacity to join forces across national borders, defeat authoritarian regimes and movements based on hate, and find the strength to build a future based on common humanity and justice for all.

African Young Women Resisting Beyond Borders

by Rosebell Kagumire

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In early 2020, just before the pandemic became the word and the life, young Ugandan women took to Twitter to expose men they alleged had sexually harassed and in some cases sexually assaulted them. These Twitter threads sent ripples beyond the online world, breaking through the national silence about the pervasive sexual abuse in the country.

For the first time, young women were speaking out in unison, although for some only momentarily. They shared their lived experiences as survivors of sexual violence, and there was no doubt that many whom they outed as rapists had targeted several young women. This was Uganda's own #MeToo moment, although the push for accountability has been a long and difficult struggle. These young women were building on the bravery of women who had earlier told their stories despite the public wrath they faced.

Sheena Bageine took on the mantle for those who still couldn't speak publicly about their experience. She received their stories and posted them anonymously. Sheena was arrested, spent a night in a police cell, and was later charged with offensive communication and cyberstalking. This is how patriarchal power operates, from online silencing to state systems ready to "teach a lesson" to women who refuse to shut up.

Young Ugandan women responded, from lawyers to mental health specialists to social media warriors, and the #FreeSheena hashtag trended. Within a few hours, she had become a liability for compromised police who released her on bail. Sheena's case is still ongoing. But the actions of her peers and the solidarity she

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evoked show how agile young women’s mobilization is in the digital age, despite the entrenched hegemonies that still prevail in daily life.

This courage has been inspired by the boldness of a long line of women organizers and resisters. In recent years, **Dr. Stella Nyanzi**, a poet and academic, has set the tone for how radical young women can be if they want to. She has tapped into **old forms of refusing to accord civility** when dealing with those abusing power. In a poem on Facebook, **she defiantly described the president of Uganda as a pair of buttocks** for failing to provide sanitary pads to adolescent girls who drop out of school. She was arrested, tried and imprisoned for more than a year.

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Though they are fewer than their male counterparts online, you can’t miss young African women’s bold outrage and organising. Access to information has always been key to any consciousness awakening. Members of this generation, despite economic and digital disparities that still remain, access information much more quickly than their own parents ever could.

Seeing other young women dare to cross the lines defining the civility expected of women, they too find their courage to join in small but growing communities. Online spaces have thus enabled pan-African organizing. A protest in Namibia or Sudan can quickly become known, within a matter of hours or days, in other countries, where others can find ways of showing solidarity.

According to a 2019 Afrobarometer report, the proportion of **women who regularly use the internet** had more than doubled over the preceding five years in 34 African countries, from 11% to 26%. But the report also showed a continuing gender gap of 8% to 11%. Women are less likely than men to own a mobile phone, use it every day, have a mobile phone with access to the internet, own a computer, access the internet regularly, and get their news from the internet or social media.

Women on these platforms face enormous challenges. They are often not considered as expert sources, even by their colleagues within progressive movement campaigns and even when the issues are about lived experiences of women. Or the voices of young women are pigeonholed and only allowed to be audible on “women’s issues.” The marginalization within public discourse extends into the online world, where hierarchies of who is heard are recreated and extended from offline. Many young women retreat from public platforms into smaller groups of trusted friends. This denies a public voice. And, like men, they must also navigate **the growing trend of internet shutdowns and surveillance** by governments.

Despite these obstacles, African feminist voices are making an impact both on and offline. As with men, those women with greatest access to the internet are disproportionately well-educated and affluent enough to pay the costs of internet access. But the growing number of feminist collectives, with commitment to collaboration and inclusiveness, attests to the potential for inclusive politics.

In some cases, issues that have been historically treated as simply “women’s issues” are slowly making it to the center of political contestation. Younger people on the continent are pushing for changes which even their elders, including those who reject the status quo, aren’t providing. Feminist voices are gaining prominence as a crucial part of this resistance.

For example, the **Feminist Coalition** in Nigeria mobilized to respond to the needs of protesters in the **#EndSARS protests** that rocked Nigeria in response to police brutality in October 2020. Around the same time in Namibia, youth-led **#ShutitAllDown** protesters demanded action to address femicide, rape, and sexual abuse.

Formed in 2019 during the popular uprising against the Omar al Bashir regime, the **#SudanWomenProtest** initiative brought together thousands of women to protest against “militarization, pervasive injustice against women and girls, gendered killings, and the normalization of sexual violence as the result of severe discriminatory laws that are still in effect in Sudan.” Sudanese women had been resisting for decades. Their visibility in the 2019 revolution that overthrew Bashir came as a “shock” to the world, as **a video of a woman on top of a car leading protest chants** went viral. In March 2021, the initiative continued the pressure on **Sudan’s transitional government** to remove all sexist and discriminatory policy.

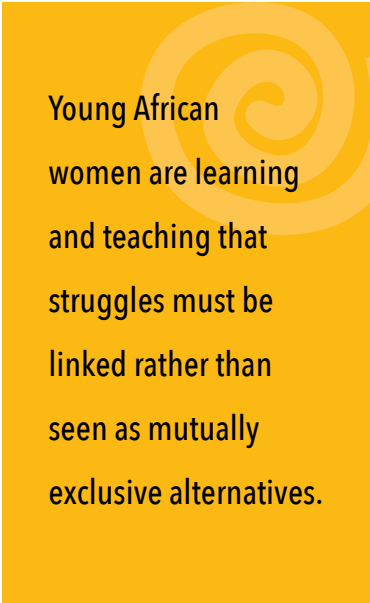
Keenly aware of global internet campaigns such as **#BlackLivesMatter**, **#SayHerName**, and **#IBelieveHer**, young women around the continent have taken their own initiatives. And like their counterparts elsewhere, they have infused intersectional feminist perspectives into their organizing. In South Africa they have formed movements for gender justice, such as the **#AmINext** protests in response to the 2019 rape and murder of university student **Uyinene Mrwetyana**. But young women have also been key leaders in the non-gender-specific **#RhodesMustFall** and **#FeesMustFall** movements.

Offline, young feminist movements and collectives remain marginalized even in young people’s movements pushing for political changes. Young people in Africa are increasingly organizing in search of radical change in the way African nations are governed, to deliver dignity and respect for citizens’ voices. Without the equal participation and leadership of young feminists, however, such a social transformation will remain elusive.

Young African women are learning and teaching that struggles must be linked rather than seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. In Nigeria, for example, young activists in the middle of the **#EndSars** anti-police-brutality campaign also insist that **#NigerianQueerLivesMatter**.

Asking young women and queer Africans to put their own struggles aside, in deference to the argument that “national” liberation must come first, as our foremothers did again and again, is not acceptable.

Women were central to the movements for independence and everyday resistance to colonial rule. But often the movements themselves morphed into ruling political class hegemonies. While we have increased the number of women in parliaments



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in Africa to match the global average of 25%, actual power in government and society falls far short of that achievement. True liberation for women and minorities from shackles introduced by colonial subversion of gender remains elusive. From homes to bars to streets and workplaces, for all the strides made in “empowering women,” we have yet to truly see the liberation of women, in the sense of being able to walk this world free in their own skin and their own bodies - free from violence.

And often there’s an expectation that oppressed people, in this case, African young women and gender-diverse people, should be civil in demanding that their full humanity be recognized. We hear condescending phrases such as “you are asking for too much.”

But who defines what is “too much” for anyone’s freedom and existence? For Sheena Bageine and Stella Nyanzi here in Uganda, and young women and queer Africans resisting dehumanization around the continent, the response is to be “too much.” It is only when women are “too much” that new cracks in the wall of patriarchal dictatorships can emerge.

Selected Resources on African Feminism

AfricanFeminism is a pan-African feminists digital platform and collaborative writing project between African authors/writers with the long-term ambition of bringing on board at least one feminist voice from each country on the continent.

African Feminism Past and Present (AfricaFocus Bulletin, 2017) contains a compilation of short articles as well as links to other sources, including books.

Talking back: African feminisms in dialogue (Africa is a Country, 2020) is a series of articles edited by Senegalese scholar Rama Salla Dieng.

Feminist Africa provides a forum for progressive, cutting-edge gender research and feminist dialogue focused on the continent. Founded in 2002 in Cape Town, it has recently moved its headquarters to Ghana. See also a wide-ranging **Zoom discussion** in March 2021 including its founder Amina Mama and Rosebell Kagumire.

Building Feminist Practice: A Pocketbook for Human Rights Defenders (Civil Rights Defenders, updated version 2021) is intended as a practical and accessible resource that guides and supports human rights defenders in Africa in building a feminist practice.

NALA - Feminist Collective is a new organization launched in June 2021. It is led by a Council of 17 African women under 40. Its mission is to Foster, Enable and Mobilize (FEM) young women from Africa and the Diaspora, to bridge between policy and implementation, intergovernmental and grassroots spaces as well as generation gap.

Selected Resources on Black Feminism in the United States

The Activist Roots of Black Feminist Theory by Linda Burnham (Organizing Upgrade, December 2020)
The idea that race, class and gender are interrelated dynamics of power and oppression has gained sufficient currency in the academic world to go by the shorthand “intersectionality.” But the origins of contemporary Black feminist theory are not sufficiently known or acknowledged, and, given the invaluable work of university-based theorists, too many assume that the core concepts of Black feminism were born in the academy. In fact, much can be traced to activists in groups including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Third World Women’s Alliance, and the Combahee River Collective.

The Combahee River Collective Statement (April 1977)
“The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”

How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective by Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor (2017)
A series of very enlightening recent interviews with both members of the Collective and current Black feminists associated with Black Lives Matter.

Making All Black Lives Matter by Barbara Ransby (2018)
Both a history and a keen analysis of complexities by scholar/activist Barbara Ransby.

Movement for Black Lives

An umbrella organization for many of the diverse groups involved in #BlackLivesMatter organizing, with a focus on key policy issues and campaigns.

About The US–Africa Bridge Building Project

Crossing Borders, Building Power for Economic and Social Justice

Vision

A world in which everyone pays their fair share to solve common problems.

Mission

Build powerful transnational alliances between local economic justice activists in the United States and Africans working to achieve this common vision.

Description

Communities in Africa and the U.S. share many things in common, from struggles for human and civil rights to the central importance of family and culture. But they also share a common experience of financial exploitation, as governments and businesses find ways to extract resources from communities of color. Estimates of the money diverted from health, education, jobs and infrastructure in both Africa and the United States through corruption, tax evasion and outright theft run as high as \$500 billion a year and contribute to the current historic levels of income and social inequality. The few transnational bodies charged with monitoring and curbing these abuses frequently lack both the authority and the political will to do so effectively.

As a result, affected communities and grassroots social justice campaigners, themselves often the victims of racial and political marginalization at home, find themselves without the resources and information they need to forge strong global alliances for change.

The US–Africa Bridge Building Project is an initiative to catalyze engagement between local struggles and global problems and promote mutual solidarity between Africans and Americans working to end corruption and tax injustice. The Bridge Building Project will draw on the strategies developed by the African liberation solidarity movement to facilitate international links between community-based advocates in Africa and the United States fighting to end racism and economic exploitation.

In the months ahead the project will publish the first of a series of resources, a Playbook for Transnational Solidarity, for use by grassroots groups that will highlight successful strategies and approaches to cross border collaboration, and provide information about ongoing campaigns and initiatives in the U.S. and Africa. Project staff will also facilitate engagement between community-based economic justice activists in select cities and African social movements to share analysis, strategies, and to assist in developing common campaigns and mutually beneficial relationships. In addition, the Project will seek to engage the growing Diaspora community in these efforts, seeing it as a critical and underutilized source of knowledge and experience.

The US–Africa Bridge Building initiative is a project of the Fund for Constitutional Government, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Contributions to the US–Africa Bridge Building Project are tax deductible to the full extent allowed by law.



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