

Editorial

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This issue of *Feminist Africa* reflects on both the impact of COVID-19 on African women and African women's responses to the pandemic. As a continent, Africa has endured decades of economic, political and social crises. Since the colonial period, the continent has been a primary commodity producer, supplying the world with both mineral resources such as gold, diamonds, coltan, manganese as well as bauxite and agricultural exports such as coffee, tea and cocoa. The prices of primary commodities are very volatile (Ocran and Biekpe, 2007) leading to cyclical economic crises on the continent. Since the 1980s as well, the neoliberal project undertaken on the continent with instructions from the international financial institutions has led to state withdrawal from the market and privatisation of social services such as education and health. As Abiru (2018) reminds us, the continuing impact of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s on the continent's economy cannot be discounted. In addition, the continent is yet to fully recover from the triple energy, food and financial crises of the 2000–2010 period (Fosu, 2013; Fosu, 2018).

Politically, the continent has fared no better. The independence governments of the 1960s were soon to be overthrown by military rulers. Between 1960 and 2000, the continent experienced an average of 4 coups a year with Burkina Faso topping the list with 8 coups since its independence (Mwai, 2022). Long term presidents, such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe who ruled for 30 years, Yoweri Museveni in power in Uganda since 1986 and 89-year old Paul Biya who is in his fortieth year as president of Cameroon, are also a feature of the continent's political system. Since 2000 as well, 25 presidents have attempted to amend constitutional provisions to enable them run for a third term in office; 18 of them have succeeded (Zounmenou, 2020).

On the social front as well, the situation is abysmal. Public health facilities are inadequate and poorly funded across the continent. Only a small minority with the financial wherewithal can access good quality health care. For the majority of the population, a fairly minor health crisis in other parts of the world, such as kidney stones, could easily lead to death (Azevedo, 2017). Similarly, on the education front,

the situation is dire. Half of the world's population of children who are out of school live on the continent. Those who are in school are not necessarily learning. In 2017, 90% of African children aged between 6 and 14 who were tested in reading and mathematics did not meet minimum proficiency levels (Paul, 2021). In spite of this reality, comprehensive social policies that would ensure that each citizen on the continent receives at minimum the basic human needs for education, health and security are a rarity on the continent (Adesina, 2015).

The continent is also by far the poorest globally. In fact, nine of the ten poorest countries in the world are located in Africa (World Population Review, 2022). On nearly every index of human development, the continent fares rather poorly. Indeed, of the 32 countries ranked lowest on the 2020 Human Development Index, only three are not located in Africa (UNDP, 2020). African women bear the brunt of the range of socio-economic burdens that come from living in countries that fare poorly on the Human Development Index. Nonetheless, across the continent, regardless of the socio-economic difficulties, women find ways to ensure the social reproduction of their families. Daily, against the odds, food ingredients are procured, meals prepared, and families fed. Women are also the de facto health personnel in families: when a family cannot afford to seek healthcare, it is the women in the family who will provide care to the ill at home. Further, they are the ones most likely to sell their last valuable item to ensure that a child gets the opportunity to attend school.

This was the state of affairs as at 11 March 2020 when the Director of the World Health Organisation, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Soon after, many African countries began to receive their first cases of the virus. As if those on the continent were not burdened enough with a range of socio-economic problems, we also had to endure both the health implications of the pandemic – having lost hundreds of thousands to the pandemic so far – and the economic difficulties that came with various government containment measures. Although these measures run the gamut from minimal restrictions, as in the case of Tanzania, to strict restrictions for extended periods of time, as in South Africa, no country on the continent has been spared the ravages of this pandemic. As Pereira and Tsikata (2021: 6) remind us, “COVID is yet one more crisis to add to the existing string of disasters” on the continent. Since 2020, there have been four waves of the pandemic, the last of which was in 2021 when two new variants of the virus (Omicron and Delcron) emerged.

Quite a bit of research has been undertaken over the last two years to explore the impact of the virus on Africa's population. These include African Arguments' collaborative effort with OXFAM to explore the impact of the pandemic on food security on the continent (African Arguments, 2021), INCLUDE Netherlands' funded studies on the nature and gendered impact of policy responses to the pandemic¹, and the International Development Research Centre's raft of funding opportunities exploring, among others, the impact of COVID-19 on nutrition and food security in Sub-Saharan Africa (IDRC, 2021). Scholars working on the informal economy have also documented the impact of both containment and mitigation measures on workers around the world. These scholars have demonstrated how these measures have gravely affected workers in the informal economy, many of whom need to work every day to be able to put food on their tables (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Osei *et al.*, 2021).

In spite of all these efforts, there is little by way of fine-grained analysis of the lived experiences of African women during the pandemic. Similarly, African women's responses to the pandemic have been poorly documented, with the exception, perhaps, of the *African Feminist post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement*. This statement, signed by African feminists and feminist organisations numbering in the hundreds, and presented to the five eminent Africans designated by the African Union to mobilise international support in addressing the pandemic (Pereira and Tsikata, 2021: 8), represents but one effort to respond to the crisis the pandemic has triggered. Across the continent, every day, women, working in their individual capacities or as collectives, have found ways to support other women burdened by the ramifications of the pandemic. Their voices and their stories deserve to be shared. This Special Issue is an effort to do just that, to put African women front and centre in an analysis not only of the impact that COVID-19 has had on women's lives, but also on the efforts that African women have made to address the challenges it has presented. This Special Issue combines academic pieces and conversations with key actors involved in addressing the challenges the pandemic has presented, as well as women's own accounts of their frontline activities over the last two years. It seeks to address some of the many questions that remain unresolved even as we continue to deal with the fallouts of the pandemic, such as: what has been the impact of the pandemic on African women from different socio-economic backgrounds? What kinds of structural transformations will enable us to beat back the pandemic and its multiple ramifications? What roles have women played in developing innovative

¹ See the suite of articles at <https://includeplatform.net/publications/>

solutions to many aspects of the pandemic? This Special Issue explores some of these questions from the perspective of a variety of authors across the continent.

The first of our feature pieces takes a broad-range approach to the subject of COVID-19 on the continent. In this piece, Kinoti and Kelleher critique African governments' approaches to containing the pandemic, an approach which was steeped in the neoliberal logic that has underpinned the economic approach these states have adopted since the 1980s. In the formulation of policies and programmes, this neoliberal logic fails to take into account the needs of citizens in a primarily informal economy such as persists on the African continent. Nor is this approach particularly gender-sensitive. No wonder, then, that the UNDP/UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker finds that only 32 per cent of the 842 social protection and labour market measures adopted by African governments have been gender sensitive (UNDP, n.d.). Roughly half of these gender-sensitive interventions have addressed domestic violence, the incidence of which has increased quite dramatically over the last two years of the pandemic. In one study conducted by a Sahelian NGO, for example, it was found that, in the six Sahelian countries of the study, domestic violence (physical or verbal) increased by as much as 12 percent, on average, during the pandemic. In Chad, the increase was as large as 30 percent (JDW-Sahel, 2020). Given the reality on the ground, Kinoti and Kelleher provide a searing critique of the many ways in which government efforts fell far short of what would be expected of states that pay attention to the needs of women. They conclude by suggesting that this pandemic offers the continent an opportunity to break from the past and to adopt an African feminist perspective on how to run an economy in ways that serve the needs of the African population.

In the second feature article, Frehiwot et al. describe the lived experiences of female academics at the University of Ghana during the pandemic. They show how women expanded their caregiving roles beyond the confines of their immediate families, both nuclear and extended, to include community members as well. This expansion in social reproduction roles occurred even as monumental changes were taking place in the world of work as these female academics knew it. Online learning, which had barely been used by most of the faculty members prior to the pandemic, became the major mode of teaching and all academics, whether saddled with social reproduction responsibilities or not, had to learn how to use these tools and deploy them in their classes rather quickly. As could be expected, in extending themselves in these many ways while maintaining all their teaching responsibilities,

the self-reported productivity levels of the female academics in this study dropped. Given the lack of institutional recognition of the undue burdens placed on female academics during this period, the authors conclude that COVID-19 will potentially have long-lasting impacts on the career progression of these women.

The third feature article, by Darkwah et al., provides a gender analysis of the containment and mitigation measures that the governments of Burkina Faso and Ghana introduced in the wake of the pandemic. This piece takes the gender analysis of the pandemic as undertaken by Frehiwot et al. further by focusing on the efforts of African governments and interrogating the ways in which the nature of containment and mitigation measures exacerbated gender inequalities in their societies. The analysis shows that various containment measures such as market and border closures severely impacted the economic fortunes of low-income traders in both countries, many of whom literally live from hand to mouth with little to no savings to tide them over during long periods of abstention from economic activities. Similarly, the mitigation measures of these states, particularly the support for businesses, were biased towards large-scale, formal enterprises, the majority of which do not belong to women in these two economies. In demonstrating the gender blind-spots of the Burkinabe and Ghanaian governments, the analysis highlights the male-centric nature of these states and echoes Kinoti and Kelleher's call for a rethinking of the economic policymaking of these states going forward.

In her standpoint piece, Leah Eryenyu also echoes Kinoti and Kelleher in calling for a new world economic order. Eryenyu reflects on the stark differences between the Global North and Global South, a difference most blatantly obvious in what the Namibian president Hage Geingob has called a "vaccine apartheid" – the situation where, while more than 82 per cent of available COVID-19 vaccines have gone to wealthy countries in the Global North, only 1 per cent have gone to the low-income countries in the Global South (Sarkar, 2021). Thus, while the majority of African citizens aged above 18 have not received even the first dose of the vaccine, in countries in the Global North, many adults have received a second and even a third booster dose and the vaccine is available to children as well. Eryenyu concludes her piece by offering what she calls a "cocktail of treatment for our current ailing political-economic order."

In calling for a new world economic order, both Kinoti and Kelleher in their feature article and Eryenyu in her standpoint piece share much in common with others in the Pan-African feminist community. Early in the pandemic, members of

this community penned an open letter to the five Africans selected as the African Union's Special Envoys mandated to seek international support for Africa's recovery efforts. In that statement, 12 recommendations were presented as to how to break the stranglehold of the neoliberal regime to ensure that Africa recovered from the pandemic on the right footing (African Feminism, 2020). As we make the slow, steady journey to a world, not necessarily post COVID-19, but that incorporates it in the myriad of burdens we face, African governments will do very well to heed the demands of the signatories to this statement.

While some feminists rallied to put together a plan for the continent post COVID-19, others, such as Vainola Makan and Wendy Pekeur, set to work addressing the many challenges that the pandemic had presented. In the rest of the pieces in this Special Issue, we highlight the efforts of various women and women's rights organisations across the continent to address different aspects of the pandemic. First are the three frontline pieces that document the efforts of small women's rights organisations to tackle specific problems created by the pandemic. In a rural farming community in the Western Cape region of South Africa, two women friends came together to work on a series of issues confronting women in their community. There were many problems to resolve – mouths to feed, money to find for other daily essentials, adequate water to ensure that the handwashing regimen required in the COVID-19 era could be maintained, and survivors of domestic violence trapped in lockdown with their abusers to be rescued from such an environment. So, they set to work doing a range of things including providing seedlings for home gardens, helping with the filling of forms to claim unemployment insurance or the R350 COVID-19 grant, knocking on the doors of municipal officials to ensure that the right to water enshrined in South Africa's Constitution was guaranteed, and breaching rules about mobility to rescue survivors of domestic violence.

Still in South Africa, Enza Social Research, a feminist NGO long concerned with Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Femicide, organised a series of webinars to which activists working on similar issues were invited. Participants came from six countries on the continent, including South Africa. Together, these women pointed out the ways in which state responses to COVID-19 were gender-insensitive and how they had to work with state officials to address these gaps in the containment measures adopted by African governments. A key lapse in the early containment measures was the complete disregard for the possibility that lockdown measures would put women in abusive relationships at risk and make them even more

vulnerable; evidenced by the fact that service providers had not also been designated essential service providers. Restrictions on mobility for domestic violence service providers in a number of countries such as Nigeria and Kenya had to be rescinded to enable these service providers address the needs of survivors of domestic violence. Basically, women's rights activists who work on domestic violence had to advocate to be considered essential service providers and to be treated as such. These service providers also pointed to the importance of self-care during this period. This is crucial, given the increased incidence of sexual and gender-based violence as a result of the pandemic. Without attention to their own physical and mental health, the service providers themselves were at risk of experiencing burnout.

The need to be flexible and able to adapt quickly to the reality on the ground was not just a requirement for state officials and service providers dealing with domestic violence. Shamillah Wilson, who works at a women's fund agency in Tanzania, points out the ways in which the internal processes of funding agencies had to be readjusted to enable the agency to respond to the persistent problems women face as well as the new burdens brought on by the pandemic. Extended proposal evaluation periods were not going to be very helpful during such a period when resources were desperately needed to address a range of problems. As such, the Women's Trust Fund in Tanzania streamlined their processes to enable them drastically reduce response times from three months to one month. A special call for proposals to address COVID-19 saw 42 proposals approved and funded in record time in 2020.

Four In Conversation pieces conclude this Special Issue. In Ghana, Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with Veronica Bekoe, a biological scientist who invented what has come to be known as the "Veronica bucket" in the early 1990s. Confronted with the reality, at the time, of no running water in many public health laboratories in the country, Mrs. Bekoe came up with a rather simple solution: she got an artisan to attach a tap to a bucket to provide a ready stream of water for handwashing in these laboratories. Three decades on, her invention has proven very useful in the country's fight against the pandemic. The simple tap attached to a bucket makes handwashing possible even in places without pipe-borne water. The device can now be found in front of many establishments across the country. Indeed, the Veronica bucket has even earned its own Wikipedia page! While there are many sophisticated versions of the bucket now, there is no denying that each one of them owes its origin to Veronica Bekoe's quest to resolve a problem she faced in her career. Rather

than throw her arms up in despair at the state of affairs at her workplace, Veronica Bekoe took it upon herself to address the issue and, in so doing, bequeathed to the Ghanaian nation a truly important public health intervention. Her contributions have been recognised by both the Ghana Health Service and the First Lady of the Republic of Ghana.

Another woman who has made great efforts to address some of the crises of the pandemic is the Cameroonian journalist, Comfort Mussa. Having experienced the challenges of living with a disability through the lived experience of her father, Comfort was particularly attuned to the additional burdens that COVID-19 placed on this group of marginalised people. They were already largely ignored in architectural design and the services provision, and Comfort Mussa was very well aware of how the measures to address COVID-19 were not being deployed in a manner that was sensitive to the unique needs of this population. Very little attention was being paid, for example, to how individuals with hearing impairments were going to keep abreast of news about COVID-19 protocols, when this information was only communicated orally. Nor were handwashing stations being set up in ways that ensured that individuals in wheelchairs could use them easily.

Comfort Mussa, therefore, set out to resolve this neglect in two ways. First, she wanted grants organisations and service providers to be powerfully reminded of the challenges that people with disability face and thus reinforce the need for them to set up systems that minimise the challenges these individuals face. To do so, she organised what she called a “feast of senses”. These were three course dinners at which participants were denied one of their senses during each course of the meal. The difficulties they encountered powerfully reminded them of the importance of inclusion in their service delivery. Secondly, Mussa’s organisation, SisterSpeak, developed a toolkit that identified the various ways in which people with disability were excluded in the delivery of COVID-19 services and how this could be addressed. In undertaking these two activities, Comfort Musah set out to disrupt and challenge the status quo in Cameroonian society, and her work on inclusion during the pandemic accomplished just that.

In the third piece in this Special Issue, we focus on Nigeria and the work of three women who are part of the Nigerian Feminist Forum: Buky Williams, who works at Education as a Vaccine, an organisation that focuses on the sexual health and reproductive rights of adolescents; Azeenarh Mohammed from The Initiative for Equal Rights, which works to protect the LGBT community in Nigeria, and Chitra

Nagarajan, who describes herself as a human rights advocate working with and for feminist movements, LGBT movements and disability movements. These three activists pointed out the ways in which the Nigerian government's mismanagement of the nation came to a head during the COVID-19 period. Citizens' frustrations with the state came to the fore and the feminist activist community worked on two major issues during this period.

The first major activity was feminists' declaration of a state of emergency regarding gender-based violence and their call for a systematic, concerted effort on the part of the Nigerian state to translate the 2015 law on domestic violence into services and policies that provided support to survivors of domestic violence. Second was the activism around police brutality and the campaign for more broadly improved governance and accountability that made global headlines in October 2020. The End SARS movement effort was spearheaded by a group of young feminists, the Feminist Coalition, who were applauded for starting a truly inclusive social movement, one that embraced individuals with different abilities and from all walks of life (Sule, 2020). Support for the Feminist Coalition's work grew quickly. Over a two-week period, they were able to raise nearly \$400, 000 from both local and international sources in support of their work. Nonetheless, the favourable support that the Feminist Coalition earned from the Nigerian community did not last long. The group's inclusive approach, particularly their acceptance of the Nigerian LGBT community, eventually proved costly for them. The largely homophobic Nigerian population began to disparage them and, soon enough, the state clamped down on their activities. In spite of the pushback from the state, the End SARS movement demonstrated the power of feminist organising, albeit for a short period of time.

The final In Conversation piece in this Special Issue does not focus on the pandemic. It does, nonetheless, speak to the theme of agency which is so strongly embedded in the other pieces in this issue. Srila Roy and Caio Simões De Araújo at the University of Witwatersrand are in conversation with three African women scholars, each of whom published a book during the pandemic: Simidele Dosekun, Oluwakemi Balogun and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué. Each of their books speaks to a particular kind of feminism as understood by a particular group of elite African women. Simidele Dosekun studies women in Lagos who spend time, money and energy being what she calls "spectacularly feminine", that is, maintaining long weaves and wigs, false nails and eyelashes, and wearing high heels and a lot of makeup. She argues that these postfeminist women both inhabit and subvert

normative understandings of the place of women in African society. Oluwakemi Balogun, also writing about Lagos, explores the beauty queens of Nigeria who, she argues, engaged in beauty diplomacy. She discusses both the opportunities and constraints that beauty diplomacy offers. Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, a historian, writes about the quiet, subtle, everyday actions of women in political movements in 1960s Anglophone Cameroon. She argues that the “progressive but conservative” actions of these women also had a deep impact on society. As spectacularly feminine women, beauty queens or actors in political movements, Africa’s women show their agency and redefine what feminism means.

All the pieces in this Special Issue demonstrate the agency of African women. Be it in their other-mothering roles as individuals or in their collective activist endeavours, African women have refused to be beaten down by the pandemic. Across the continent, they have risen to the challenge and, in some cases, led the way in demonstrating how African states should be responding to a crisis such as that which we currently confront. The women who shared their work during the pandemic with us represent a tiny percentage of the thousands of women who worked tirelessly across the continent to improve the lives of their fellow citizens. They are the unsung sheroes of the pandemic whose efforts we duly acknowledge. While this Special Issue sheds light on the immense contributions of these sheroes to our ability as a continent to have survived the pandemic, there are still many issues to resolve. Which of the impacts are short-term and which will be more long term? How will the existing vaccine apartheid shape the nature of the pandemic on the continent? What changes, if any, will we witness in the world economic order as a result of the pandemic? These and many other questions can serve as the subject of future issues on the pandemic in this journal.

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