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Unfinished Freedom:
Persistence of Colonial Gendered Governance and the Contemporary Feminist Efforts to Contest It

Research report - March 2026

Executive Summary

This report examines the renewed politicisation of African women's bodily autonomy across Kenya, Namibia, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In each context, African women's bodies become publicly visible primarily through crisis — particularly through high levels of sexual and gender-based violence and femicide (SGBVF), as well as racial disparities in reproductive health outcomes. Anti-femicide mobilisations in Kenya and Namibia, diasporic campaigns such as #SayHerName in Germany, and sustained scrutiny of maternal mortality gaps in the United Kingdom reflect intensifying demands that violence against Black women be understood not as isolated incidents, but as indicators of structural and institutional failure.

The report argues that these contemporary struggles are rooted in colonial governance systems that reorganised gender, labour, and authority. Colonial administrations did not simply impose political control; they institutionalised gendered hierarchies that repositioned women as economic dependents, while extracting their unpaid reproductive and agricultural labour. At the same time, colonial regimes redefined violence against women as "customary" or "cultural," obscuring the structural conditions that produced and normalised it. Sexual violence, in contexts such as British Kenya and German-ruled Namibia, was often bureaucratically managed in ways that shielded state authority from accountability.

Although formal sovereignty shifted with independence, many of these governing logics persist. Religion, law, and medicine continue to function as interlocking systems of bodily regulation. Missionary moral frameworks shape contemporary debates on sexuality and family life in Kenya and Namibia. Inherited legal structures determine which harms are prosecutable and which remain marginal. Reproductive governance remains central to state authority, visible in restrictive abortion regimes, documented cases of forced sterilisation in Namibia, and racialised medical neglect in the United Kingdom.

Across contexts, institutional and media narratives produce hierarchies of recognition that render some women "protectable" and others deviant or undeserving. Regulation is therefore not exceptional but embedded within the architecture of the modern state.

Feminist movements across the four countries are actively contesting these structures. Mobilisations such as #OnsIsMoeg, #ShutItAllDown, and #SayHerName challenge narrow constructions of womanhood and expose how migrant women, sex workers, and other marginalised groups are frequently excluded from protection and public mourning. However, activism operates within constraints: adversarial legal systems, class and generational fractures, and donor-driven funding frameworks that can depoliticise structural critique.

The report concludes that African women's bodily autonomy remains structurally constrained across colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic settings. Violence and reproductive control are not episodic failures, but manifestations of enduring governance logics through which sovereignty, morality, and economic order are maintained.

Key Findings

- Colonial systems of gendered governance continue to shape legal, religious, medical, and humanitarian institutions across both African and European contexts.

- Reproductive regulation remains a key instrument of state power, visible in Namibia's apartheid-era abortion law and in the persistent racial disparities in maternal mortality in the United Kingdom.

- African women's suffering is made highly visible in moments of crisis, yet it is often disconnected from meaningful institutional accountability.

- Respectability politics continues to influence whose lives are recognised as worthy of protection, whose deaths are publicly mourned, and who is excluded from collective concern.

- Contemporary feminist movements are opening new political spaces that challenge inherited hierarchies and call for systemic, rather than incremental, transformation.

Recommendations

CROSS-CUTTING POLICY PRIORITIES

- Reframe the epistemological foundations of gender policy beyond universalised Western categories, incorporating historically grounded and context-specific approaches.

- Adopt relational models of harm and prevention, recognising the structural dimensions of violence.

- Embed colonial accountability within institutional reform, including legal, medical, and administrative systems.

- Strengthen transnational and diasporic feminist alliances, while supporting independent funding infrastructures that reduce donor gatekeeping.

Context-Specific Recommendations

- **Kenya:** Integrate historical accountability into reproductive health and SGBVF policy. Expand beyond punitive frameworks toward community-based models of healing and prevention.

- **Namibia:** Explicitly link GBV policy to colonial histories and racialised economic inequality. Develop independent feminist funding mechanisms to reduce donor conditionality.

- **United Kingdom:** Implement race-conscious medical training and enforceable accountability mechanisms to address racial disparities in maternal health and reproductive harm.

- **Germany:** Extend decolonisation efforts beyond symbolic restitution toward institutional reform in healthcare, asylum systems, and survivor support services.

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Introduction

1) REPORT OBJECTIVES

In contemporary public discourse, African women's bodily autonomy is most often broached through the language of bodily harm and physical safety, shaped by persistently high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, and femicide (SGBVF). This is reflected in recent large-scale mobilisations in Kenya and Namibia (New Era Newspaper, 20 October 2020; Kitiro, 2024), as well as in transnational contexts, where campaigns such as #SayHerName in Germany and UK reporting on racial disparities in maternal mortality similarly foreground Black women's vulnerability to state and institutional violence (Florvil, 2021; The Guardian, 20 April 2023). Whilst these mobilisations signal intensified confrontation with violence rooted in the intimate sphere—sexuality, reproduction, and bodily integrity—they are not without historical precedent.

African women have long mobilised against gendered injustice, including during anticolonial and national liberation struggles, where they acted as fighters, organisers, and political leaders (Britton & Shook, 2014: 154). What distinguishes contemporary activism, however, is not a newfound concern with women's bodies, but rather the explicit articulation of bodily autonomy as a central political claim. This shift marks both continuity and rupture: continuity in women's long-standing resistance to gendered harm, and rupture in the naming of bodily autonomy as a terrain of struggle that had previously been subordinated to broader projects of national sovereignty, liberation, and state formation.

To understand why bodily autonomy has emerged with such urgency today, it is necessary to return to the colonial period and identify the earliest form of violation imposed on African female bodies.

This violation did not begin with physical violence alone, but with the epistemic and ontological reordering of African societies through colonial rule—specifically, through the colonial invention of the "woman" itself.

As Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí argues, colonial discourse presumed maleness as the default condition of political subjecthood, producing a binary world of coloniser and colonised that was implicitly imagined as male (1997: 121). Colonial domination was framed as a "manly" prerogative, a contest in which the colonised were rhetorically stripped of their manhood. Within this gendered logic, African females were rendered largely invisible as political subjects and were reconstituted primarily as bodies: sites for sexual access, moral regulation, and reproductive control rather than as agents of social and political life (Oyěwùmí, 1997: 121). The colonial invention of the "woman" thus enacted a profound dispossession of bodily autonomy. African women's bodies became legible to the colonial state not as bearers of authority but as objects to be governed—simultaneously protected and disciplined in a manner that justified perpetual intervention while systematically foreclosing their agency.

This colonial logic, which equates political subjectivity with maleness, did not dissolve with independence. Rather, it continues to operate as a governing grammar that structures who is recognised as a political subject, whose suffering becomes visible, and whose claims are treated as matters of state concern. Across contexts—from the African continent to the diaspora—this rationale shapes regimes of violence, protection, and public recognition.

In Africa, the wave of anti-femicide mobilisations in Kenya and Namibia between 2020 and 2024 clearly illustrates this continuity. These movements challenged the longstanding tendency to frame gender-based violence (GBV) as a social problem to be managed by NGOs and international organisations rather than as a question of structural state accountability (UN Women, 2021; Ng'ang'a, 2021). Whilst civil society has played an indispensable role in the postcolonial period—particularly in advancing sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis—these interventions have often operated within liberal feminist frameworks shaped by donor priorities (Evelia et al., 2007; Patel, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2013). Within this paradigm, women are frequently cast as vulnerable recipients of protection and services. Their suffering is acknowledged, but their political agency is constrained. They appear as beneficiaries rather than as sovereign actors making claims on the state.

What the anti-femicide protests disrupted was precisely this grammar. By demanding state accountability, protesters insisted that violence against women is not a private tragedy or a development issue, but a political question that exposes the gendered foundations of postcolonial sovereignty itself.

A related dynamic is evident in Europe today, where institutional violence is almost exclusively framed through a racialised lens that centres Black men as its archetypal subjects. This focus arises not from a greater severity of Black men's suffering, but from their persistent construction as "threats" within enduring colonial imaginaries of public order (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 255). Consequently, racial violence becomes publicly legible primarily through dramatic encounters between Black men and the police, while its gendered dimensions—particularly the specific violations endured by Black women and children—recede from view.

Just as the fight for national independence often centred on reclaiming masculine political agency, contemporary movements against state violence frequently reproduce this frame, inadvertently consigning Black women to a familiar silence. **Their hyper-visible suffering as bodies is met with an invisible status as political subjects, ensuring that the colonial logic that first rendered them governable objects remains powerfully intact.**

Examining four different geographic contexts (Kenya, Namibia, Germany and the United Kingdom), this study aims to investigate how African women's bodily autonomy is regulated, constrained, and contested across colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary contexts.

The objectives are to:

Examine the historical roots of bodily regulation: Trace the colonial state policies and missionary moral interventions that shaped governance over African women's sexuality, reproduction, and social behaviour (Section 1).

Analyse continuities and transformations in postcolonial governance and explore how state, religious, legal, and humanitarian institutions inherited and rearticulated colonial logics of control over women's bodies (Section 2).

Investigate how African women in Kenya, Namibia, the United Kingdom and Germany navigate systems of conditional protection, respectability politics, and moral regulation (Section 3).

By **demonstrating** the continuity of colonial logics as they manifest across the four geographical contexts, this report also examines the practices of contestation employed by feminist movements and the persistent absence of accountability.

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2) CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This report is grounded in a decolonial African feminist framework, drawing on the work of Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, Maria Lugones, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and other scholars who examine how coloniality continues to shape power, gender, and embodiment. This lens foregrounds the ways in which colonial structures and epistemologies produced enduring hierarchies that systematically regulated African women's bodies, sexuality, and social agency. Central to this framework is the concept of the colonial "gaze." Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) demonstrates that Western epistemology organises the social world visually, treating the body as the primary site of social differentiation along gendered and racial lines.

Colonial rule imposed a rigid gender binary and hierarchy where such distinctions did not previously exist in the same form, change to "African women" as a distinct, subordinate within a four-tiered colonial order: European men, European women, African men, and African women as "the Other" (Oyěwùmí, 1997:122). Through this logic of categorisation and ranking, colonial rule obscured the nuanced experiences of African women, producing systemic vulnerabilities and legitimising interventions in their bodies, reproduction, and mobility.

Maria Lugones (2007) highlights how these hierarchies compound forms of oppression, producing gendered and racialised vulnerabilities that continue to persist across contemporary state, legal, and social institutions. Nkiru U. Nzegwu (2020) further shows that these colonial structures are reproduced through state-sponsored patriarchy, moral regulation, and social norms that police women's behaviour and define the figure of the "proper woman," while simultaneously erasing precolonial histories in which African women exercised political, social, and economic authority.

A decolonial African feminist approach therefore interrogates not only structures of power but also the epistemologies that sustain them. It asks: How do contemporary narratives, policies, and legal frameworks reproduce colonial logics? Whose bodies are made visible, and whose remain marginalised? Which forms of agency, knowledge, and resistance are recognised, and which are rendered illegible?

By centring African women's experiences, this framework situates bodily autonomy as both a site of struggle and a lens through which the enduring effects of coloniality can be critically understood.

This study adopts a multi-sited, mixed-method research design that combines qualitative interviews with interpretive analysis of activist narratives and institutional contexts across Kenya, Namibia, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This design allows for a comparative examination of how African women's bodily autonomy is governed, contested, and represented across national and diasporic settings shaped by distinct yet interconnected colonial afterlives.

The core empirical material consists of **semi-structured interviews** with twelve participants, selected for their sustained engagement in feminist activism, advocacy, research, and cultural production. Participants were purposively sampled to reflect a diversity of roles, national locations, and forms of expertise, including grassroots organising, policy advocacy, artistic production, and

academic research. Interviews explored experiences of bodily autonomy, state and institutional governance, representational regimes, and strategies of resistance and care.

The report also analyses 761 **social media posts** drawn from X and Instagram. The analysis focuses on written posts and images, excluding video content in order to ensure consistency across platforms, especially as X functions primarily as a text-based medium.

The media analysis draws on a review of 144 **newspaper articles** published between 2011 and 2025 from newspapers in Kenya, Namibia, Germany, and the United Kingdom, including national and widely circulated outlets such as Daily Nation and The Standard (Kenya), The Namibian and New Era (Namibia), Deutsche Welle (Germany), and The Guardian and BBC News (UK).

The study draws on **archival materials** from Namibian women's movements, including organisational records, campaign documents, and narratives from women involved in the movement, to capture historical strategies, activism, and experiences within both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

The dataset is weighted toward the Kenyan and Namibian contexts due to both analytical focus and differences in political visibility. Since 2020, feminist mobilisation against SGBVF in Kenya and Namibia has been sustained and highly visible online, generating substantial digital archives of posts, images, and campaign narratives explicitly centred on women's bodily autonomy. By contrast, in Germany and the United Kingdom, organising by African and Black women is often situated within broader migrant justice or anti-racism frameworks, where "Black women" as a political category is less consistently foregrounded. This makes gender-specific activism less digitally traceable, even as Black and migrant women remain disproportionately

visible in discourses of racialised governance and discrimination. The asymmetry in data reflects these sociopolitical realities: African contexts provide dense, gender-explicit activist archives, while European sites illuminate the transnational circulation of governance logics, representational regimes, and activist strategies in contexts where race, gender, and migration intersect differently.

Section 1

COLONIAL REORDERING AND THE POLITICS OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S BODIES

This section analyses the historical and structural conditions through which African women's bodily autonomy has been regulated, obscured, and contested within colonial governance. By tracing how authority over women's bodies was institutionalised through law, religion, and knowledge production, this section provides a foundation for understanding present-day struggles over visibility, protection, and political recognition.

The analysis that follows demonstrates that these dynamics were **not incidental** to colonial rule but integral to its functioning, particularly through the reconfiguration of gendered power relations. The section unfolds in four parts. Firstly, it explores how colonial administrations stabilised male authority by transforming indigenous institutions and codifying "customary law."

Secondly, it examines how African men were repositioned as intermediaries of imperial power within the private sphere, allowing violence to be reframed as cultural rather than colonial in origin. Thirdly, it analyses how colonial regimes managed the visibility of violence against African women, selectively acknowledging certain harms while erasing others. Finally, it considers how missionary and humanitarian narratives constructed African women's bodies as objects of moral concern and reform, laying the epistemic foundations for respectability politics and enduring regimes of bodily governance.

I) COLONIAL REORDERING: INSTITUTIONALISATION OF MALE AUTHORITY AND DISPLACEMENT OF WOMEN FROM FORMS OF POWER

Colonialism's reconfiguration of African societies produced enduring harm not only through territorial dispossession but through Africa's forced incorporation into the modern world system as a space of labour, mobility, and extraction.

As Peter Ekeh (1975: 6) argues, colonialism's epochal significance lay in its reordering of moral, social, and gendered relations. Precolonial institutions were not entirely eradicated; instead, they were selectively adapted and incorporated into European systems of law, administration, and governance—what Ekeh (1975: 8) describes as "transformed indigenous structures." These were precolonial social institutions reshaped to function within the symbolic and practical frameworks of colonial authority, operating in a broader socio-cultural system imbued with new meanings and hierarchies (Ekeh, 1975: 8). Within this framework, male authority

was stabilised and institutionalised, whilst women were systematically displaced from forms of power that had previously been situational, shared, or non-binary in African gender systems.

Across both British and German colonial contexts, these processes were further consolidated through the codification of "customary law," which transformed flexible, negotiated social practices into rigid legal forms intelligible to colonial governance. Under the guise of preserving tradition, colonial administrations reconfigured women's bodies as sites through which order, hierarchy, and control were enforced. This culminated in what Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997: 146–147) terms the "wifisation of citizenship," whereby African women were recognised legally and politically not as autonomous subjects, but as dependents whose social existence was mediated through men. On the other hand, Sharon B. Stichter (1977) demonstrates that colonial labour regimes deliberately engineered dependency by **excluding women from waged labour all the while relying on their unpaid subsistence work to subsidise low male wages.** Over time, this imposed dependency was misrecognised as "tradition," naturalising women's economic reliance on men and recasting survival itself as moral indebtedness. The combination of physical vulnerability and economic dependence—rooted in the colonial governance of reproduction, labour, and property—limited women's autonomy over their bodies, mobility, and livelihoods.

This restructuring was underpinned by European biological determinism. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997: 1) argues, Western thought privileges biological explanations of difference, collapsing social hierarchy into presumed natural hierarchy. In tracing the genealogy of "degeneration" in European intellectual history, she shows how nineteenth-century theories framed

difference simultaneously as scientific deviation and moral failure (Oyěwùmí,1997: 1). This fusion of biology and morality enabled those in positions of power to naturalise their dominance and to interpret inequality as the inevitable outcome of inherent difference rather than historical process (Oyěwùmí, 1997: 1). Within this framework, gender difference was read primarily through anatomy, and male authority was treated as biologically grounded and therefore self-evident. When exported into colonial contexts, these assumptions imposed a rigid male/female binary onto African societies whose gender systems were often organised through seniority, lineage, or relational authority. The result was not simply cultural misunderstanding, but structural reclassification: women's political, economic, and ritual authority was marginalised as colonial administrations recognised men as the primary legal and political subjects. These transformations fundamentally altered how African women were rendered legible as political and social subjects, particularly within regimes of migration and labour mobility.

II) AFRICAN MEN POSITIONED TO ENFORCE DISCIPLINE IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Within this reordered gender regime, African men were repositioned—most visibly in British colonial Kenya—as intermediaries of imperial authority, occupying an ambivalent position as both subordinated racial subjects and empowered gendered agents. Kenyan colonial archives reveal how epistemic and physical violence converged through this arrangement, producing African women's bodies as governable objects rather than rights-bearing subjects.

Across colonial contexts, harm to African women's bodily autonomy thus operated on two interconnected levels. First, it was enacted through physical violence—rape, coercion, and sexual exploitation—perpetrated by agents of colonial power and by African men incorporated into its governance structures (Budasz, 2024: 117; Kanogo, 2005). Second, and more fundamentally, this harm was reproduced through a comprehensive archival erasure. Colonial legal and administrative practices systematically denied African women the status of speaking subjects, reducing their bodies to silent instruments through which power was exercised, contested, and officially recorded (Budasz, 2024: 117; Kanogo, 2005; Henrichsen, 2008:68). In the colonial archive, women appeared not as agents with voice or volition, but as objects within ledgers of custom, units of labour, or cases of moral transgression (Henrichsen, 2008:68; Kanogo, 2005: 3–4).

As Nancy O'Rourke (1995: 77) notes, colonial territories were imagined as spaces inhabited by "primitive natives" yet valued for their extractive potential; maintaining imperial order therefore required regulating African populations at the most intimate level—sexuality, reproduction, and domestic life. African women's bodies became the primary terrain through which this regulation was enacted, while **African men were positioned as intermediaries responsible for enforcing discipline within the private sphere.**

This restructuring had a crucial interpretive effect: violence perpetrated by African men against African women was increasingly read not as an outcome of colonial power, but as evidence of African cultural backwardness. In colonial Kenya, this logic shaped how sexual violence was understood, documented, and governed. Tabitha Kanogo's (2005: 60) analysis demonstrates how epistemic and physical violence converged in cases where African men raped women under the belief— circulated through colonial medical and missionary discourse—that venereal disease could be cured through intercourse with "clean" women from other ethnic groups.

While African men appeared in colonial records as the immediate perpetrators, framing this violence as a product of African ignorance obscured the colonial labour regimes, racial anxieties, and pseudo-scientific knowledge systems that produced these beliefs in the first place. **Violence was thus indigenised:** attributed to "African culture," even as colonial rule actively produced the epistemic conditions that rendered it intelligible and actionable.

III) MANAGING THE VISIBILITY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK WOMEN

The dynamics, where African men were elevated into gendered authority and their violence reframed as cultural rather than colonial, cannot be understood in isolation. They formed part of a broader colonial reordering of personhood itself, one that produced uneven regimes of visibility, recognition, and protection. As Maria Lugones (2007: 187) cautions, patriarchy is not a universal or transhistorical system of male dominance; it was constituted through race, capitalism, and heterosexuality within colonial modernity. Colonial rule generated hierarchical categories of humanity in which "woman" came to signify white bourgeois femininity, while "Black" implicitly referred to heterosexual Black men (Lugones, 2007: 187). **African women were rendered epistemically incoherent within this schema**—neither fully women nor fully political subjects—and their experiences of violence were systematically distorted or erased (Lugones, 2007: 187).

In British East and Southern Africa, this logic shaped both public discourse and legal governance. Discussions of sexual violence overwhelmingly centred on the protection of white women, even as sexual assaults against African women by European men were widely known within colonial administrations (Anderson, 2010: 48, 63). Internal records reveal a stark disjuncture between knowledge and recognition. Summarising debates in 1920, Kenya's Commissioner of Police, Notley, privately acknowledged that assaults on African women by Europeans were "of almost common occurrence," given the disparities of status, age, and coercive power involved (Anderson, 2010: 48, 63). Yet these violations were routinely minimised, euphemised, or denied in public accounts (Anderson, 2010:

63). What Anderson terms the problem of "white peril" exposes colonial authority not as a mechanism for preventing harm, but as a system for managing visibility—deciding which violations could be named and which had to remain unspoken.

A similar configuration operated in German colonial Namibia, though within a more openly militarised and carceral regime. Following the genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama, prisoner-of-war camps institutionalised conditions in which sexual violence was not exceptional but structurally embedded. As Wolfram Hartmann (2007: 43) shows, overcrowding, forced labour, and constant surveillance created environments of total vulnerability in which German men exercised routine sexual access to African women. The case of Victor Franke, the highest-ranking German official at Otjimbingue, accused of raping a young woman employed as a launderer and leaving her pregnant, illustrates how sexual violence was absorbed into administrative rationality rather than treated as a moral or legal transgression. Its resolution through a monetary settlement underscores how African women's bodily violation was rendered bureaucratically manageable, folded into the everyday functioning of colonial rule (Hartmann, 2007: 42).

Both colonial Kenya and German Namibia reveal how harm to African women's bodily autonomy emerged from layered systems of violence. Physical assault was perpetrated by both African and European men, but its meaning and governance were shaped by colonial epistemologies and legal regimes that rendered some harms visible while systematically erasing others.
Violence was alternately racialised,

culturalised, or bureaucratised, consolidating authority over African women's bodies by displacing responsibility onto "tradition," "custom," or administrative necessity.

IV) AFRICAN WOMEN'S BODIES: INSTRUMENTS OF MORAL OUTRAGE IN NEED OF INTERVENTION

Long before African women's bodies were regulated through formal law or medicine, they were rendered governable through narrative (Magubane, 1997; Tamale, 2011:21). Missionary writing and early travel accounts produced a moral grammar through which African bodies, especially women's bodies, were made intelligible to Europe as objects of concern, intervention, and rescue (McKittrick, 1999: 266; Ligaga, 2020: 63–64; Tamale, 2011: 22).

This narrative governance established a framework in which control over African women's sexuality and reproduction was justified through moralised depictions of excess, suffering, and vulnerability—a framework that continues to structure postcolonial media, policy, and humanitarian advocacy.

As some of the earliest written records on African sexualities, these accounts established enduring stereotypes through ethnocentric and racialised interpretations of difference. African women's bodies were particularly central to this process, functioning as symbolic evidence of African "backwardness" and moral disorder, thereby legitimising colonial intervention as both necessary and benevolent (Tamale, 2011: 21-22). Juxtaposed against the rigid sexual norms of Victorian Europe—where women were expected to be sexually restrained, modest, and morally pure—African women were cast as their antithesis. Travel writers and missionaries described African women as sexually excessive, insatiable, and morally unregulated (Tamale, 2011: 21–23). Myths proliferated: that African women gave birth without pain, menstruated excessively, possessed pendulous breasts as hereditary traits, and were biologically closer to nature than to civilisation (Tamale, 2011: 21–23). As Sylvia Tamale observes, "Europeans' depictions of African women as insatiable, amoral, barbaric beings said more about the fears, fantasies and preoccupations with sexuality of the former than anything else" (2011: 23).

Crucially, early colonial and missionary writing did more than sensationalise African women as hypersexual and amoral. It laid the epistemic groundwork for respectability as a central technology of governance. By constructing African women's bodies as sites of excess, danger, and moral failure, these narratives transformed sexuality and reproduction into problems requiring discipline, reform, and surveillance. Representation here was not merely descriptive but productive: it generated a moral framework through which African women could be governed, first symbolically and later institutionally.

These narratives were embedded within what Zine Magubane (1997) identifies as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarian discourse. Emerging alongside evangelicalism, humanitarian narratives centred the body as the primary site of suffering and moral appeal. Detailed descriptions of pain, degradation, and vulnerability- on slave ships, in prisons, and in colonial spaces, produced an affective bond between those who suffered and those who claimed the authority to intervene (Magubane, 1997: 4). African women's bodies thus became instruments through which moral outrage was mobilised and intervention justified. The body functioned simultaneously as evidence of harm and as the rationale for external control. Within this representational economy, bodily assessment was never neutral. As Zine Magubane (1997: 4) notes, evaluations of the body were also evaluations of moral worth, intellectual capacity, and civilisational rank. African women's bodies were read not only as sexually deviant but as indicators of Africa's supposed moral deficiency. The representation of African women as hypersexual or deviant thus served a dual function: it pathologised their bodies while indicting their societies as morally deficient and in need of intervention.

By the height of the colonial period, these narratives did not disappear; they were recalibrated. In Kenya, the figure of the African woman shifted from the hypersexual "primitive" of early travel writing to a morally regulated subject aligned with colonial social order (Kanogo, 2005). Missionary education and Christian doctrine became key instruments in reshaping feminine subjectivities, producing a divide between "educated" and "uneducated" women (Ligaga, 2020: 37). Respectability—expressed through marital conformity, domesticity, and sexual restraint—was elevated as evidence of civilisation and progress, while women who fell outside these norms were cast as socially deviant and morally dangerous.

The Namibian case reveals a parallel yet distinct articulation of this logic. In Ovamboland, missionaries intervened in precolonial systems that viewed pre-initiation pregnancy as a profound social and cosmological threat, often met with extreme sanctions (McKittrick, 1999: 268). Missionaries positioned Christianity as humane and progressive by offering sanctuary to pregnant girls. Yet this humanitarian gesture did not dismantle reproductive control; it reconfigured it. Once inside mission spaces, pregnant girls were required to confess, repent, and reform their behaviour. Initiation was rejected as a marker of legitimacy and replaced with marriage, while unmarried pregnant converts faced expulsion from the church (McKittrick, 1999: 270). Rescue thus became conditional, operating as the entry point into intensified moral regulation.

Across the historical, legal, epistemic, and narrative processes traced in this section, a clear pattern emerges: the infringement of African women's bodily autonomy was not an accidental byproduct of colonial rule, but a foundational and deliberate mechanism of imperial governance. The institutionalisation of male authority through customary law, the delegation of disciplinary power to African men, the selective recognition of harm, and the moralising narratives of missionaries all converged to make the control of women's bodies essential to the colonial project. These practices secured labour, naturalised racial hierarchies, and rendered colonial order legible and stable by systematically stripping women of authority over their own sexuality, mobility, and reproduction. As such, bodily autonomy was not merely constrained but rendered structurally incompatible with empire. Recognising this reframes colonial violence not as episodic excess but as constitutive logic: the denial of African women's bodily integrity was central to how colonialism reorganised political subjectivity, economic extraction, and moral hierarchy.

Understanding this deep entanglement is therefore critical to any effort to reckon with the enduring legacies of colonial power in the present.

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Section 2

CONTEMPORARY STATE REGULATION AND THE GOVERNANCE OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S BODIES

The modern state—both in its colonial form and postcolonial afterlife—has been a central agent in the regulation of African women's bodies. From its emergence under colonial rule, state power in Africa extended far beyond territorial conquest or economic extraction. It invested deeply in reorganising authority over intimacy, sexuality, reproduction, and bodily integrity. African women's bodies became a primary terrain through which sovereignty was asserted, populations were managed, and social order was maintained. Women were not recognised as autonomous political subjects; they were constituted as governable populations whose reproductive capacities could be monitored, disciplined, and intervened upon in the name of morality, health, and progress.

This configuration of power did not dissolve with formal decolonisation; rather, it was rearticulated. **Postcolonial states inherited both the institutional architecture of colonial governance and its core rationalities, particularly those rooted in bourgeois European conceptions of order, propriety, and social regulation.** As Peter Ekeh (1975) demonstrates, colonial rule was underwritten by European bourgeois projects that consolidated economic power through political domination, all the while presenting this domination as a civilising mission. When direct colonial rule became politically untenable after the Second World War, these logics were not abandoned; **they were reorganised through neocolonial mechanisms.** Western powers increasingly relied on indirect control, advocating political independence while ensuring that the economic and political trajectories of newly independent states remained externally oriented (Mlambo et al., 2025: 247–248).

This shift was facilitated through the elevation of a compliant African bourgeois class, produced through colonial education and administration, whose legitimacy was anchored in inherited colonial institutions (Ekeh, 1975: 95–96). **Independence therefore marked not a rupture with colonial governance but its indigenisation: the postcolonial state emerged as a rearticulation of empire, with local elites managing politics and the economy while reproducing colonial regulatory logics, particularly those governing gender and reproduction.** Though the personnel, symbols, and legal vocabularies of governance shifted, the underlying rationality through which women's bodies were rendered objects of regulation remained strikingly consistent, albeit now reframed through the idioms of national culture, public morality, and development.

Postcolonial states inherited and adapted colonial regulatory frameworks, often in partnership with religious and humanitarian institutions, producing continuity in governance strategies under the guise of modernisation, rights, or protection.

This section examines how law, medicine, and moral discourse have functioned as instruments of political and social control, tracing their origins in colonial governance and their entanglement with postcolonial state formation. **It highlights how contemporary interventions—whether legal reforms, humanitarian programmes—frequently reproduce inherited hierarchies of power, visibility, and conditional inclusion.** By situating African women's bodily autonomy within these structural and historical frameworks, this analysis underscores that regulation, rather than being incidental or exceptional, is **constitutive of modern state authority and its enduring legacies.**

I) RELIGION AS MORAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL POWER

Religion was not separate from colonial rule; it helped build it. Missionary institutions worked alongside colonial administrations to embed patriarchal moral norms into systems of governance in both Africa and Europe. Churches trained African elites, shaped ideas about sexuality and family, and legitimised state control over women's bodies. At the same time, these moral ideas were not confined to the colonies. They circulated between empire and metropole, producing shared standards of "proper" womanhood that applied across Nairobi, London, and Berlin (Burton, 1994; McClintock 1995).

In Europe, Christianity also played a central role in nation-building. It provided shared values that strengthened social cohesion and helped organise political authority (Becker, 2021: 6). Even as European states formally separated church and state, religious institutions remained influential in education, welfare, and public morality (Becker, 2021: 6). The same institutional strength that supported European nation-states also enabled colonial expansion. Church, state, and economic actors could operate independently yet cooperatively, giving European powers flexibility and reach (Becker, 2021: 6). Christianity therefore shaped state formation in both Europe and Africa—though in different forms: nation-states in Europe and colonial states in Africa.

The racial logic underpinning this relationship predates the colonisation of Africa. During the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of the Americas, church authorities debated whether Indigenous peoples possessed souls (Grosfoguel, 2013; 83). While some argued they did, others denied their full humanity. This marked a shift from medieval religious exclusion to modern racial hierarchy. Over time, theological arguments about the soul were replaced by biological arguments about race, but the underlying logic remained: certain groups were defined as less fully human and therefore available for domination (Grosfoguel, 2013; 83). This framework became central not only to global systems of labour exploitation and capitalist accumulation, but also to later human rights responses, including women's rights frameworks. Although exploitation and rights-based advocacy appear to stand in opposition, both developed within the same historical order structured by racial hierarchy. The language may shift—from domination to protection—but the underlying logic of categorising, managing, and governing populations remains. African women's reproduction and labour have been deeply entangled in this system, positioned alternately as resources to be exploited and as subjects to be regulated, saved, or disciplined.

After independence, the religious infrastructure established under colonial rule did not disappear. In Namibia, for example, churches that had been pillars of colonial authority later aligned themselves with anti-colonial liberation movements. While this alignment conferred moral legitimacy on the struggle, it also secured the church's continued influence within the postcolonial state. One of the activists we interviewed in Namibia highlights the tensions and contradictions this dynamic produces in contemporary governance, particularly in the ways biblical authority is mobilised in public debate. As they explained, political leaders frequently invoke scripture to justify restrictive positions—"The Bible says"—while overlooking the Bible's historical entanglements with practices such as slavery or the disciplining of women. In their view, this contradiction is rooted partly in the historical role of the church, especially the Lutheran Church, in the liberation struggle, which has meant that many members of the governing majority party emerged from church-affiliated spaces. As the activist put it:

"I think the reason why it's become a Christian issue (abortion law) is because... people... don't understand that we were colonised and the Bible continues to colonise us. Our ministers would be like 'No, but the Bible says,' but then they'll be like, 'Yes, we are free and we shouldn't be colonised.' ...Why are you upholding this colonial law?... That also falls into the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in Namibia".[1]

A similar pattern is evident in Kenya, where Christianity retained significant influence amongst the postcolonial elite. During the presidency of Daniel Arap Moi from 1978 to 2002, religion occupied a central place in public life. Nyayo, meaning "footsteps" in Kiswahili, was a philosophy coined by Moi under the banner of peace, love, and unity. His public piety, regular church attendance, and embrace of the Nyayo philosophy, with its emphasis on love, peace, and unity, reflected the entanglement of political authority and Christian moral discourse (Ligaga, 2020: 63). Kenyan scholars argue that Moi's worldview was shaped by conservative missionary Christianity combined with Kalenjin masculinity, enabling him to present himself as a benevolent patriarch who disciplined the nation through moral and gendered norms (Ligaga, 2020:63).

Christianity, long associated with colonial and missionary authority, helped sustain narratives of progress and civilisation that defined acceptable forms of modern womanhood. To be recognised as a modern woman was to be legible to both colonial and postcolonial state structures, which required compliance with laws and social expectations that disciplined female behaviour (Ligaga, 2020: 63–64). In both Namibia and Kenya, the church's entanglement with the state enabled colonial moral rationalities to be indigenised.

Today, Christianity continues to operate politically in Europe, though in a transformed register. In Germany, references to "Judeo-Christian values" frequently surface in debates about immigration and integration (Gregg 2010). Such appeals frame Christianity as the historical foundation of European identity, despite the fact that contemporary European societies are highly secularised. In this context, religion functions less as lived faith and more as a civilisational marker—defining who belongs and implicitly contrasting a European "self" with a Muslim "other" (Gregg 2010; Peker 2022).

A related dynamic is visible in the United Kingdom. Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, for example, has argued that his immigration proposals align with Britain's Judeo-Christian values, even when senior Church leaders have

1.Interview conducted
on 29 October 2025

rejected this interpretation (Mbakwe 2025). At the same time, other faith communities in the UK mobilise religious language in the opposite direction—to challenge restrictive state policies (Baptist Times 2025). In response to recent immigration reforms, coalitions of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders have invoked principles of dignity and justice to criticise exclusionary rhetoric. Religion, therefore, does not operate uniformly: it can be used both to legitimise state power and to contest it.

Across these contexts, what remains consistent is that Christianity operates as a moral framework through which belonging, respectability, and authority are defined. In postcolonial Namibia and Kenya, religious authority shapes national debates about abortion, sexuality, and family. In Germany and the United Kingdom, Christian-inflected norms shape integration policy and public discussions of migration. African migrant women encounter expectations about respectability and proper womanhood not only through churches, but through bureaucratic systems that quietly measure their conduct against inherited moral standards.

The missionary moral order that developed alongside colonial expansion continues to structure governance transnationally. It does not operate uniformly, nor does it always produce the same outcomes. Sometimes it legitimises restriction and control; at other times it provides the language for resistance. But in both Africa and Europe, African women's bodies remain a key site where this moral infrastructure is activated.

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II) LAW, OMNIPOTENCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF GENDERED LEGIBILITY

The law became one of the most effective instruments for consolidating postcolonial state authority. Under colonial rule, judicial power was displaced from relational, community-based systems and concentrated within formal courts dominated by male officials. This shift marked what Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997: 126) identifies as the moment when "the state was becoming omnipotent," precisely as women were excluded from its political and legal institutions. Domains that had previously been negotiated through social relations—marriage, inheritance, sexuality, reproduction, and responses to sexual harm—were redefined as matters of state jurisdiction.

Through the **imposition of European legal traditions**, colonial administrations codified rape, morality, and family laws that privileged racial order, male authority, and property relations over women's bodily autonomy. These laws did not merely respond to violence; they actively produced hierarchies of harm by determining which violations were legible and prosecutable, and which could be ignored or rendered invisible (Etherington, 1988: 41).

This juridical reorganisation exemplifies Peter Ekeh's concept of "migrated social structures": imported moral and legal frameworks that were naturalised over time, coming to appear neutral or benevolent even as they entrenched new forms of gendered domination.

The persistence of these juridical rationalities into the postcolonial era reveals the durability of colonial statecraft. While constitutional forms, personnel, and political symbols have changed, the underlying logic through which African women's bodies are rendered legible, governable, and expendable remains largely intact.

III) THE CONTROL OF BLACK WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE CAPACITY AT THE HEART OF MODERN STATE

Across postcolonial contexts, law and medicine function as interlocking technologies of power that mediate bodily autonomy through inherited legal categories, moral assumptions, and evidentiary standards. These systems consistently privilege state authority, medical expertise, and patriarchal legitimacy over women's lived experiences of harm. Regulation of African women's reproduction is therefore not incidental to state formation; it is constitutive of it. From colonial conquest to postcolonial governance and contemporary rights-based regimes, the state has relied on reproductive control to

secure political order, manage labour, and sustain capitalist accumulation.

Namibia offers a particularly useful illustration of this continuity. Research on the HIV/AIDS pandemic documents the coercive and forced sterilisation of women living with HIV, practices enabled by misinformation, language barriers, and conditional access to healthcare (Ahmed et al., 2013: 27). These violations are not aberrations within an otherwise neutral legal order. They are structurally enabled by the Abortion and Sterilisation Act of 1975—an apartheid-era law that remains in force.

By restricting abortion to narrowly defined circumstances such as rape, incest, or threat to life, the Act embeds a framework of paternalistic oversight in which African women's reproductive decisions remain subject to medical and legal authority (Jauch et al., 2009; Namukwambi et al., 2023: 4). The endurance of this legislation demonstrates how postcolonial legality reproduces colonial governance under the guise of continuity and stability.

This contemporary regulation echoes earlier regimes of bodily subjugation. The Act is itself an artifact of apartheid governance, resonating with colonial "native hospital" systems that treated African bodies as sites of disease, risk, and intervention rather than as autonomous subjects (Becker, 2011). These medical regimes were deeply entangled with the reproductive violence inflicted on Herero and Nama women during and after the 1904–1908 genocide. Forced sterilisation, sexual violence, and biomedical experimentation functioned as tools of both eugenic erasure and imperial knowledge production. As one Namibian activist and politician recounted in our interview, **women were compelled not only to endure bodily violation but to participate in colonial terror by cleaning the severed heads of people they knew so that skulls could be shipped to Germany for racial "scientific" inquiry.** This violence

exceeded biological elimination; it weaponised women's reproductive and affective labour, transforming their bodies into sites where genocide, science, and state power converged.

Centuries later, the legacy of such control persists in contemporary forms of reproductive violence and neglect. In the United Kingdom, Black women are up to four times more likely to die during childbirth than white women, and nearly half report that their concerns during labour are dismissed or minimised (The Guardian, 20 April 2023). These disparities are often framed as failures of care or implicit bias, but such explanations obscure their longer historical logic (UKYouth. Org, 13 October 2020). As Campbell (2021) shows, Western medicine was founded through the exploitation of Black women's bodies, particularly in the development of gynaecology through experimentation on enslaved women. Contemporary medical neglect is thus not an institutional anomaly but a continuation of a medical culture that normalises Black women's suffering and discounts their authority.

These cases demonstrate that harm to African women's bodily autonomy is not an unintended by-product of governance but a structural feature of modern state power. Across postcolonial and metropolitan contexts, the state intervenes in reproduction as a site of political and economic management. As Silvia Federici argues, the regulation of women's bodies was foundational to capitalist expansion, from the witch trials in Europe to colonial medical regimes that disciplined reproductive labour and delegitimised women's knowledge (Lyons, 2019). Contemporary legal, medical, and rights-based regulation of African women's bodies is therefore not a deviation from the modern state's project but one of its most enduring expressions. To frame these dynamics as isolated failures of care or incomplete rights implementation is to

obscure a deeper truth: **the modern state itself has been built through the control of women's reproductive capacity in service of capitalist order.**

IV) RESPECTABILITY AS A STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL AND RECOGNITION

The logic of representing Black women as morally deficient and in need of intervention was amplified through colonial and postcolonial media. As Sarah Chiumbu and Mandla Radebe (2020: 10) argue, media institutions are not neutral observers but profit-based enterprises embedded in capitalist relations of power. They produce ideas and audiences as commodities, enabling capital to expand globally while shaping political influence and zones of accumulation.

African media, while locally specific, are integrated into global systems through commercialisation, liberalisation, and internationalisation (Chiumbu & Radebe, 2020: 13). Within this political economy, professional norms such as "objectivity" often strip violence of historical and structural context, presenting harm as episodic, individualised, and detached from colonial and capitalist histories.
The result is a persistent and profitable script: African women's bodies are rendered hyper-visible as sites of crisis, eliciting sympathy and calls for intervention, while the deeper structures producing that suffering remain obscured and intact.

Within this enduring representational regime, European intervention, once framed as Christian duty, has been repackaged as humanitarian or human rights obligation. Respectability emerges, and persists, as the prescribed corrective: a moral and behavioural standard through which African women are measured, disciplined, and hierarchised. What originated as a colonial technology of governance is recast as a universal benchmark of progress.

This logic of respectability was absorbed into postcolonial social hierarchies in ways that made it both attractive and disciplining. As Dina Ligaga (2020:37) explains while citing Berger (2016: 14), the colonially sponsored cult of domesticity resonated with some African women because it offered protection, recognition, and social mobility amid profound economic and political disruption. In Kenya, women who accessed missionary education were positioned as suitable partners for African men entering colonial bureaucratic and urban labour markets, while those excluded from these institutions were increasingly marginalised within shrinking rural economies or pushed into precarious urban livelihoods (Ligaga, 2020: 37).

Respectability thus functioned not simply as an external imposition but as a differentiated resource, promising security and status to some women while simultaneously producing others as irresponsible, backward, or in need of moral reform.

Importantly, respectability operated relationally because its value depended on distinction. To be recognised as respectable required proximity to dominant norms of marriage, domesticity, sexual restraint, and Christian morality, and distance from those

who failed or refused to embody them. In this way, respectability produced internal hierarchies amongst African women, organising inclusion and exclusion not only through colonial power but through processes of differentiation within African communities **themselves. Respectability was therefore both a means of survival and a mechanism through which women were positioned unevenly within colonial and postcolonial social orders.**

This logic of differentiation, however, was not confined to African contexts but was reproduced globally through Western feminist knowledge production. As transnational feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty Talpade argue, Western discourse constructs universalised images of the "Third-World woman" —veiled, tradition-bound, and sexually constrained—by layering "Third-World difference" onto sexual difference. These figures are not merely descriptive; they are constitutive. They depend on, yet simultaneously reinforce, an opposing self-presentation of Western women as secular, autonomous, and liberated, a discursive construction rather than a material reality. What respectability accomplishes locally through churches, schools, and class hierarchies, Western feminist discourse accomplishes globally.
The "third-world woman" becomes the figure against which Western feminism secures its moral authority and political coherence, extending the hierarchical logic of respectability into the very frameworks meant to represent and liberate women worldwide.

As Chandra Mohanty Talpade (1988: 81–82) notes, it is the boundedness of the periphery that enables the centre to appear universal. Respectability therefore becomes a means of negotiating visibility and protection across scales, a way of purchasing partial exemption from hierarchies of suffering by aligning with dominant moral and epistemic norms.

These representational regimes do not remain confined to the colonial past; they actively shape contemporary feminist activism and intervention. NGO-driven feminism, particularly when dependent on foreign funding, often operates within humanitarian frameworks that privilege victimhood, technical solutions, and measurable outcomes. In doing so, it reproduces earlier colonial strategies, such as state-sanctioned voluntarism in Namibia, which redirected African women's political energies away from structural resistance and toward managed forms of participation (van Tol, 2015: 455). Whilst such interventions can yield important legal reforms and services, they frequently depoliticise struggles against gendered violence by severing them from histories of colonial extraction, racial capitalism, and state power (Currier et al., 2021).

Human rights discourse and international funding architectures thus function as contemporary vehicles for older logics of governance. They operate as systems of epistemic and financial gatekeeping that regulate which forms of suffering are rendered visible and which political demands are deemed legitimate. When a Namibian medical doctor, social justice activist, and co-founder of a digital health and advocacy social enterprise circulated a proposal for a sex offender registry in Namibia, it was rejected not on the grounds of its substantive merits but because it fell outside the parameters of donor mandates. As she explained:
"Most of these organisations are funded and have to do their advocacy well within the lines of what their funders say."[2]
In this case, power operated not through overt repression but through civility, proceduralism, and managerial restraint.

2. Interview conducted
on 29 October 2025

In conclusion, the regulation of African women's bodies has never been peripheral to the exercise of state power, it has been central to its formation, consolidation, and reproduction. From colonial legal codes that codified male authority and rendered women's harm selectively visible, to postcolonial alliances between church and state that indigenised missionary moral frameworks; from apartheid-era sterilisation laws that persist into the present, to contemporary humanitarian and rights-based interventions that govern through donor mandates rather than democratic demand, each iteration reveals the same underlying logic. African women's bodies remain a primary terrain upon which sovereignty is asserted, populations are managed, and social hierarchies are secured. This continuity is not mere happenstance; it reflects the durable architecture of a state form built through the control of reproduction, sexuality, and bodily integrity in service of capitalist accumulation and racialised order. Contemporary frameworks of rights, development, and protection, however well-intentioned, too often operate within this inherited architecture, regulating which suffering is visible, which voices are legitimate, and which demands are fundable. To recognise this is to understand that the denial of African women's bodily autonomy is not a correctable failure of otherwise neutral institutions. It is a constitutive feature of modern state authority itself, one whose legacies continue to structure the conditions under which African women navigate survival, recognition, and resistance today.

Section 3

ONGOING FEMINIST EFFORTS TO CONTEST COLONIAL GENDERED CATEGORIES

Contemporary feminist activism reveals both the persistence of colonial gendered categories and the ongoing efforts to contest them. Struggles over bodily autonomy remain inseparable from the unfinished task of dismantling the colonial invention of the "woman" and its enduring effects across time and place.

I) CHALLENGING THE NARROW CONCEPTION OF WHO IS AFFECTED BY GENDER VIOLENCE

The regulation of sex work in postcolonial Africa provides a stark example of how colonial moral and legal frameworks continue to determine which bodies are considered worthy of protection. In both Kenya and Namibia, the work of certain activists directly challenges this colonial gender order, highlighting and resisting the systematic exclusion of individuals whose lives are deemed ungrievable. In Kenya, a profound continuity exists between colonial governance and contemporary discourse in shaping the moral and material conditions of sex work. **This continuity reveals how the category of "woman," as invented and enforced under colonial rule, continues to stratify and regulate which female bodies are deemed worthy of protection and which are excluded from public concern.** According to one activist and the co-founder of Usikimye—an organisation combatting sexual and gender-based violence that provides refuge and voice for survivors in Kenya—the disproportionate violence faced by sex workers is systematically ignored.

She explains:
"The other thing that I have a very big problem with is that we never cover sex workers' deaths. Yet when it comes to femicide, the people who are killed the most are sex workers"[3]

She attributes this dehumanisation directly to the colonial-era moral framework imposed by Christian missionaries:
"we dehumanised sex workers because religion came and told us sex workers are a problem."[4]

This contemporary erasure directly mirrors a colonial logic where the value and visibility of African women's labour and lives were determined by their utility to a racial capitalist order, filtered through a lens of Christian morality.

Historically, as Luise White's (1990) analysis of colonial Nairobi demonstrates, **sex work was embedded in the racialised labour hierarchy of the colonial economy.** Whilst officially criminalised and pathologised through laws against solicitation and

brothel-keeping, it was simultaneously an **indispensable, if invisible, pillar of the migrant labour system.** Colonial authorities publicly condemned prostitution as a moral blight, drawing on 19th-century European ideas that sought to sanitise and regulate prostitutes' bodies for the service of middle-class men (White, 1990: 2). **Yet, they privately depended on this labour to sustain the urban workforce, treating African women's bodies—their sexuality and reproductive capacity—as a reliable means of capital accumulation.** White thus reframes prostitution not as "a despicable fate," but as a critical economic strategy within a system that offered African women few alternatives for survival or autonomy (1990: 2).

The convergence of these two strands-economic utility and moral condemnation-defined the colonial construction of the sex worker. This figure was rendered hyper-visible as a vector of disease and moral corruption, yet invisible as a labouring subject with economic agency. Her body became a site for both exploitation and intense regulation. This dual colonial logic survives intact in present-day Kenya.

The economic structure that pushes women into sex work as a vital survival strategy persists, exacerbated by neoliberal policies. Simultaneously, the moral framework introduced by colonial Christianity continues to legitimise the social and legal exclusion of sex workers, casting them as sinful and undeserving of protection. The result is a cruel continuity: just as the colonial state relied on but disavowed sex work, the postcolonial public sphere relies on a category of "woman" that purports to represent all, while its boundaries, policed by respectability politics, actively exclude the sex worker. Her death is not mourned in the national discourse on femicide because, within this inherited logic, she was never fully granted the status of a woman whose life is grievable.

Thus, the struggle for sex workers' bodily autonomy today is a direct confrontation with a colonial legacy that continues to govern through the intertwined mechanisms of economic precarity and moral exile. Namibia offers both parallels and points of divergence. Like Kenya, it remains deeply shaped by colonial moral and legal regimes that continue to structure responses to gender violence. Yet during the #OnsIsMoeg[5] and #ShutItAllDown protests, activists actively resisted the narrowing effects of inherited colonial categories. Rather than mobilising a singular, moralised figure of the "woman" as the primary subject of harm, On X, campaign leaders deliberately expanded the scope of accountability to include not only women, but also men, children, and elderly people affected by gendered violence.

On X, this refusal of categorical reduction was articulated clearly:
"#OnsIsMoeg #WeAreTired #OtwaLoloka #Tuaurua ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! Stop Killing, Abusing, Raping & Abducting Us! Women, Men, Children & Elderly Is Us! #EndGBV"[6]
Others made the movements epistemic and articulated the movement's intellectual and political commitments more explicitly situating their activism within decolonial and intersectional traditions:

"REPEAT AFTER ME: pan-Africana, Queer, Feminist, Womanist, Sistahood, Decolonial, Radical Education. That is what this movement (moment) is. Take note and confront the erasure." #ShutItAllDown #OnsIsMoeg[7]

These interventions signal a conscious attempt to rupture colonial

5.'Ons is Moeg' means
"We are tired" in Afrikaans.

6.Tweet posted on
8 October 2020

7.Tweet posted on
12 October 2020

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epistemologies by refusing the reduction of gendered violence to a singular, depoliticised category of "woman". Rather than treating bodily harm as an individualised injury borne by an abstract female subject that has been categorised as a "woman", Namibian activists foreground intersecting forms of vulnerability and responsibility, reimagining bodily autonomy as a collective and relational concern embedded within broader structures of power.

As Becker observes in her analysis of Namibia's young activists, this orientation reflects an aspiration towards "another possible world"—a decolonised Namibia, ordered differently from the hierarchies inherited and reproduced through colonial rule, including authoritarian governance within a formally democratic state, heteronormativity, and persistent constraints on women's bodily autonomy (2022: 83).

II) SOLIDARITY AND THE CHALLENGE TO NAVIGATE THE GENDER COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE THROUGH CLASS, INTERGENERATIONAL TACTICS AND MALE ALLYSHIPS

The inherited category of "woman" also generates fundamental tension within feminist politics. While the "woman" functions as a technology of subordination, it simultaneously produces the assumption of a shared struggle, a common adversary, and aligned political interests among those placed within it. This tendency to frame oppression through a simplified binary of "men versus women" obscures significant differences in power, vulnerability, and political orientation among women themselves (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). As bell hooks argues, bourgeois feminism has historically relied on this fiction, promoting separation from men as a universal strategy while leaving racial and economic hierarchies intact. Such an approach, hooks notes, was only ever viable for privileged women whose proximity to power insulated them from its consequences (1984: 77).

The most consequential divisions, therefore, do not simply lie between men and women, but amongst women positioned differently within patriarchal, racialised, and class-based systems. These internal fractures are particularly visible in the sphere of political representation. High levels of women's participation in formal politics are often taken as evidence of gender progress, yet they can obscure the extent to which women in power may uphold the very structures that sustain inequality.

A social media post reflecting on Namibia captures this contradiction, observing that women in parliament frequently operate as *"tokens… who live to serve and uphold harmful patriarchal systems"[8]*

Such figures do not represent a failure of sisterhood; rather, they expose the limits of

8.Tweet posted on 28 April 2022

the category "woman" as a coherent political subject. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí reminds us, feminist concern over the "disappearance" of the woman as a unified subject is misplaced, since such unity never existed in the first place (2000: 1097).

This dynamic was also evident in the Kenyan context. However, what may appear as a lack of solidarity should be productively understood as a structural effect of an imposed analytic category that collapses profoundly unequal social locations—elite politicians, sex workers, and rural mothers—into a singular identity. In doing so, this category obscures the differentiated, and at times competing, material interests and political priorities that shape women's struggles in specific historical and social contexts.

Chandra Mohanty Talpade's critique of feminist universalism further clarifies this problem. She cautions against analyses that presume sameness by treating women as a homogenous group defined by shared oppression, rather than attending to the specific historical and ideological conditions that produce vulnerability in particular contexts (1988: 6). In a similar vein, Ifi Amadiume challenges feminist frameworks that equate power primarily with state inclusion and formal citizenship, noting that such perspectives marginalise alternative forms of political life and resistance (1995: 35).

This insight is especially important in African contexts, where anti-colonial struggles were not solely campaigns for access to the state but, in many cases, efforts to resist incorporation into state structures altogether (Amadiume ,1995: 35). As Ifi Amadiume argues, some communities articulated alternative conceptions of authority and autonomy that were central to indigenous women's movements (1995: 35). Recognising

this history complicates linear narratives of feminist struggle while also reminding us that although shared categories such as "woman" can highlight common experiences of oppression, they do not determine uniform understandings of power or strategies for resistance. Even though African women may share embodied experiences of oppression through the imposed category of "woman," the meanings attached to power, liberation, and resistance shift across historical moments, producing distinct political agendas. Solidarity cannot be assumed on the basis of shared identity alone. It must be actively negotiated across generational, political, and historical differences.

As one emeritus Namibian professor reflected while discussing activist trajectories in Namibia, contemporary movements diverge sharply from earlier generations:
"The activists nowadays are decolonial and interested in going back to their African roots"[9]

In contrast, earlier activists prioritised achieving equality and inclusion within existing structures, a focus also evident in archival materials from the Namibian women's movement.

This contrast highlights how enduring conditions of gendered violence can shape distinct political imaginaries over time, producing new approaches to activism and social change. Strategies once understood as emancipatory may later appear limited or even complicit. Acknowledging these differences does not foreclose solidarity; rather, it demands a more historically attentive and reflexive approach to it.

In an interview with an activist and writer involved in hashtag movements against femicide and GBV in Kenya, reflected on this layered inheritance of struggle:

9.Interview conducted on 17 October 2025

"They've laid the foundations… we are building or adding the next building blocks… and again, the fact that older feminists are able to tap into certain spaces or have resources that we can't, that would give us the momentum to keep going."[10]

For this activist, intergenerational struggle is grounded in lived memory. She recalled how Kenyan mothers, resisting the Moi regime, staged nude protests that deliberately subverted respectability politics. By mobilising cultural understandings of motherhood, shame, and moral authority, these women transformed norms used to discipline them into tools of resistance. As she explained, they reclaimed nakedness, long associated with disgrace, as a political weapon.[11]

Historical accounts note that these protests were further shielded by indigenous belief systems, which held that young men who witnessed an older woman's nudity risked spiritual sanction, limiting police intervention (Women's Media Centre, 2019).

Intergenerational dialogue thus extends beyond protest tactics to the transmission of political memory and ethical knowledge. One user on X, reflecting on contemporary hashtag activism against femicide, recalled how women from the region produced a femicide quilt at the 1995 Beijing Conference to memorialise victims of gendered violence. Practices such as storytelling, remembrance, and collective mourning reflect long-standing African modes of knowledge production. As scholars like Magoqwana note, Makhulu or grandmothers have historically served as custodians of communal knowledge, guiding communities ethically, spiritually, and politically across generations (2018).

These examples demonstrate that solidarity cannot be assumed on the basis of shared identity alone. It must be actively negotiated across generational, political, and historical differences. While the issues confronting African women may recur, the contexts in which they are contested, and the strategies considered viable or legitimate- do not. Intergenerational dialogue therefore emerges not as a seamless inheritance of struggle, but as a necessary and contested space in which feminist politics are continually reimagined.

Organising uncritically under this inherited category of "woman" risks reproducing what Audre Lorde famously described as "the master's tools." This risk becomes especially pronounced in debates around male allyship. When gendered violence is framed primarily through a binary opposition between men and women, men become legible as allies only within a predefined antagonistic terrain. This makes their participation simultaneously possible and politically fraught.

Movements such as #ShutItAllDown in Namibia and #EndFemicideKE in Kenya are energised by opposition to gendered violence, yet they also navigate tensions in how solidarity is performed. In conversation with one activist and writer in Kenya, she explained that men may enter feminist spaces in the name of support; yet their presence can sometimes overshadow women's leadership or shift attention away from the specific vulnerabilities women face. This tension is reflected in online discourse. When one user dismissed feminist criticism by posting:

"Trust a Twitter feminazi to make everything a gender war. Anyway, a man was shot dead three days ago while protesting over the murder of a 19-year-old girl,"[12].

Another activist responded by reframing the issue:

"They have been trying to tie the femicide movement under one umbrella of political causes because they want us to shut up about it, not because they care. It's a gender war but one gender is being killed by the other at alarming rates"[13]

The underlying concern here is that naming femicide is not an act of declaring war against men, but a demand to confront the stark reality that women are being killed at disproportionate rates. To centre women's vulnerability is not to erase male allyship or deny that men can also be victims of violence. Rather, it is to insist that feminist movements must be allowed to name the specific, structural nature of the harm women face without being accused of fomenting division. The struggle is not about pitting genders against each other, but about refusing to let the urgency of women's deaths be diluted or erased in the name of solidarity against state oppression.

The contradiction here is structural rather than incidental. Male allyship becomes intelligible only within the colonial binary of "men versus women," yet transformative solidarity requires moving beyond that very frame. Collaboration with male allies therefore demands careful navigation of this colonial inheritance. The task is not to recruit men into a simplified oppositional struggle, but to reconfigure the political terrain itself by contesting the category of "woman" and the gender binary it sustains. As bell hooks reminds us, men's most meaningful contribution lies not in occupying feminist space, but in "exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers" (1984: 81).

Only by unsettling these foundational logics can alliances function as a practice of dismantling colonial gender architectures

rather than merely redistributing power within them. In this sense, the question of allyship is inseparable from the broader decolonial project: liberation cannot be achieved by inverting hierarchies, but only by abolishing the epistemic foundations upon which they rest.

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13.Tweet posted on 26 June 2025

III) CHALLENGING EPISTEMIC ERASURE

Colonial and postcolonial archives have overwhelmingly privileged militarised, masculinised, and public forms of political action, rendering other modalities of resistance unintelligible. As Rebisz (2024) demonstrates, archival records of the liberation struggle in Kenya remain largely silent on women's everyday experiences in resettlement villages. Even when women are invited to narrate their histories, their accounts are often interpreted as minimising or depoliticising their own contributions. Such readings, however, reveal more about the epistemic expectations of the archive than about women's political agency. Rather than assuming self-erasure, it is necessary to recognise that many African women operated within interpretive frameworks that were never designed to be legible to colonial, nationalist, or even feminist archival regimes. Political labour frequently took forms such as care networks, oral transmission, song, embodied practice, and intimate memory work—modalities that exceeded the archive's narrow definitions of politics.
Attending to this disjuncture unsettles assumptions about women's supposed silence and exposes how colonial conditions of visibility continue to shape what is recognised as political.

However, this epistemic erasure is not confined to their resistance; in the contemporary era, it also extends to their suffering. The global aftermath of George Floyd's murder intensified this pattern. Public debate coalesced around police brutality as a racialised phenomenon, yet the distinct experiences of Black women were consistently marginalised. The case of Jackline Nadler, a Kenyan woman brutalized by police in her Chemnitz home—where she reported being forced to strip naked in the presence of male officers—failed to catalyse the sustained outcry seen for male victims (The African Courier, 28 February 2021). Her violation remained a spectral footnote, unlike the galvanising campaign for #Justice4Lorenz. Here, the colonial invention of political subjecthood as male continues to dictate whose bodily violation is recognised as a public crisis.

However, countering epistemic erasure does not take a singular form. In some contexts, resistance is articulated through demands for visibility, recognition, and inclusion—women speaking, testifying, and documenting as a means of securing equality within dominant frameworks. In other contexts, particularly those grounded in Afro-centred epistemologies, the response to erasure is not to seek equivalence within existing structures, but to cultivate alternative modes of knowing and being. Here, the counter to erasure is not recognition but multiplicity.

The strategic use of personal narrative and testimony functions as a critical intervention against historical erasure.

Here, activists directly confront the archival silence by insisting on the restoration of voice and specificity. They work to re-inscribe women as speaking subjects into the public record, not as anonymous data points, but as individuals with histories, relationships, and violated futures. This is embodied in campaigns that insist on naming, such as #SayHerName and #Usikimye[14], which explicitly reject the anonymity of the statistic

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14.Usikimye is a Swahili phrase meaning "Do Not Be Silent." The phrase is also the name of a prominent Kenyan community-based organisation founded by Njeri wa Migwi and Stella Kachina to combat gender-based violence (GBV). The organisation provides safe houses, counselling, and rescue services to survivors and has become a significant hashtag in Kenya's struggle against SGBVF.

or the colonial case file. Crucially, activists also archive testimonies that expose layers of violence systematically omitted from official records. These narratives do more than generate outrage; they perform a corrective archival function, documenting forms of harm that exist at the margins of legal categories and mainstream reportage.

For example:
"Baby Aisha, four days old, raped and torn apart by her father… She died in my arms… Baby Aisha we remember you today and always."[15]
and: *"I held a 92-year-old… in her moments of lucidity she would say her youngest son would rape her… He later murdered her."*[16]

These testimonies operate as counter-archival interventions, but they do so from distinct ontological positions. They bear witness to forms of violence that resist easy categorisation—violence that spans infancy and old age, unfolds within intimate spaces such as the family, and is systematically excluded from official records. In restoring speech to those rendered silent by both perpetrators and dominant modes of historical recording, these interventions challenge the archive on its own terrain. Where colonial archives reduced women's bodies to objects of regulation and control, contemporary testimonial practices seek to reconstitute them as subjects of violation, grief, and political claim-making. Within this framework, documentation itself becomes a strategy of redress, reclaiming visibility in spaces from which women have long been excluded.

Contemporary media and organisations, in Kenya and Namibia, often seek to combat this erasure by deploying statistics to dramatise the severity of gendered violence. Sister Namibia, for instance, posts figures such as *"4400 GBV cases in 11 months".*[17]

These metrics aim to render structural violence visible in the public record. However, this practice of quantification, while politically vital, risks reproducing a form of archival logic. As Ian Hacking (1999) warns, counting is not a neutral act of revelation; it is a constitutive act that creates new categories for understanding people. Statistics can aggregate suffering into impersonal data, a modern echo of the colonial ledger that recorded populations without preserving their subjectivity.

In the diaspora, where Black women occupy a minoritised and racialised position within liberal democratic states, activism often shifts away from state reform toward challenging erasure and representational violence. Organisations such as Tubman.network e.V. in Germany and Southall Black Sisters in the UK use digital platforms to document institutional violence, racial profiling, and gendered harm that mainstream European discourse obscures or bureaucratises. Their work echoes an older struggle: contesting the colonial logic that renders Black women's suffering either cultural, exceptional, or invisible.

15.16.Tweet posted on 15 April 2025

17.Instagram Post published on 4 June 2025

IV) LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND SHAME AS A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

Across Kenya and Namibia, African women's movements increasingly engage the state and its legal institutions as sites of accountability, even while recognising their colonial inheritance. Activist posts on

X demand urgent state action:
"Kenya's femicide crisis demands urgent action! The government must enforce laws, fast-track justice, and support survivors"[18]
"Femicide in Kenya is a national crisis—129 women murdered in just 3 months. Silence is complicity"[19].

In Namibia, activists similarly call on the judiciary to *"tighten the loopholes and laxity that are present in the criminal justice system"[20]*.
These demands reflect neither naive faith in the state nor an uncritical embrace of law, but a strategic engagement with one of the few institutional mechanisms available for protection and redress.

Yet, as one activist reflects, *"justice is seen under the lens of the state,"[21]* even though the state and its justice system are colonial inheritances that continue to fail locally and globally in addressing intimate partner violence—including in the United States and the European Union. This structural continuity limits contemporary responses to gendered harm, even as activists mobilise the law as one of the few available tools for protection. This tension is especially visible in activist work with survivors. One activist describes the erosion and loss of indigenous vocabularies for articulating pain and recovery, noting how Western therapeutic frameworks dominate donor-funded interventions:

"We seem to have lost the language… This is the Western knowledge of how we are supposed to deal with a person… What if we just do drumming?"[22].

Her critique extends to the justice system itself: *"Our system of justice is very adversarial. It is not restorative… Justice is never seen under the lens of community"[23]*

These reflections underscore how colonial epistemic hierarchies continue to shape not only legal responses to violence, but also the very forms of language, healing, and legitimacy available to African women.

Within Europe, what emerges is not emancipation but a reordered continuity of colonial governance, reshaped, modernised, and globalised, yet fundamentally intact. For one interviewee, a PhD candidate and experienced advocate working with refugees in the UK, this dynamic became apparent during a meeting with medical academics developing a so-called "decolonial" curriculum.

After raising concerns about the historical exclusion of people of African descent from pharmaceutical research, she recalled a familiar pattern of acknowledgement without accountability:

"There's always an acknowledgement to say yes, I've heard what you've said, but never, 'OK, and this is what I'm going to do about it…The follow-up is never there. I told them I have woken up during a dental procedure because the dosage was incorrect. Even with the people they studied to determine painkiller doses, it wasn't people

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18.Tweet posted on 18 February 2025

19.Tweet posted on 2 May 2025

20.Tweet posted on 29 October 2020

21.22.23.Interview conducted on 8 November 2025

who looked like me."[24]

This lack of accountability is structural, extending from the historical absence of accountability for colonial violence. As a result, African women in the diaspora continue to be mediated through inherited colonial representational regimes that shape how their vulnerability, agency, and legitimacy are recognised.

What emerges here is a form of epistemic and political displacement. Though physically present in institutional spaces, African women are repeatedly displaced from the position of knowledge-bearer or decision-maker. Their testimony is heard but not acted upon; their experience is acknowledged but not allowed to reshape the structures that produced the harm. This displacement operates through a conditional form of belonging: African women's vulnerability is recognised selectively, often only in moments of crisis, while their authority to interpret that vulnerability or to demand structural change is continually deferred. Much like colonial pass laws that rendered Africans "pariahs in the land of [their] birth" (Lonsdale, 2001; Plaatjie, 1916), contemporary diasporic governance enforces gendered hierarchies that subsume women under the homogenising category of the "African migrant."

When Kenyans appear in British media or Namibians in German discourse, they are frequently framed through narratives of reparations to Mau Mau veterans or the repatriation of Herero and Nama human remains. While such accounts foreground historical violence, they homogenise African experiences and obscure the specific, gendered atrocities endured by women.

Within these regimes of visibility, shame and stigma function as powerful disciplinary tools. Violence is routinely individualised and framed as either a moral failure of the victim or the pathology of an isolated perpetrator, rather than traced to the structural conditions that produce and sustain harm. This pattern emerged repeatedly in conversations with activists in Europe, who described how similar dynamics govern the lives of migrant and asylum-seeking women. As one of the activists working with asylum seekers and based in the UK, explained:

"If you ask me where the stigma is coming from—media and racism. Racism that comes with asylum seeking… we know it's not just the term asylum seekers. It's Black people they are against."[25]

These dynamics are compounded by community silence rooted in fear and survival. In an interview, an activist and co-founder of a Berlin-based migrant support network described posting urgent requests for assistance in large WhatsApp groups composed of Black women. Public responses were limited, and some questioned why such messages were shared at all. Yet privately, women frequently contacted her to express that they too needed help but felt ashamed to ask:

"People here have an incredibly difficult time, but they don't dare talk about it because they are ashamed"[26]

For many migrants, shame is produced through the persistent risk of failing to "make it" within hostile migration regimes that demand self-sufficiency while systematically withholding support. While these pressures affect many racialised migrants, their consequences are particularly acute for women because responsibility for children becomes both a moral obligation and a site of state surveillance.

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24. Interview conducted on 30 September 2025

25. Interview conducted on 7 October 2025

26. Interview conducted on 3 December 2025

V) RESPECTABILITY ACROSS SCALES: FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE AND COLONIAL CONTINUITIES

Across activist accounts from Germany and the United Kingdom, motherhood emerged as a primary axis through which precarity is experienced and managed. Women risk losing their children if they cannot sustain prolonged legal battles, while asylum procedures routinely disregard childcare needs and family stability. Housing allocations frequently fail to account for children's safety, schooling, or continuity of care. One community organiser from a migrant support network captured this convergence of pressures by describing migrant communities as living in a permanent state of emergency:

"It is still crisis management… our people are in constant crisis with this kind of thing"[27].

Another community organiser based in the United Kingdom similarly described forced evictions and the bureaucratic cruelty embedded within asylum systems:

"You are made homeless when you still have the right to appeal… A system that is more humane, that would be the bottom line. They're human beings" [28].

In both contexts, the state appears less invested in resolution than in sustaining conditions of managed instability, with profound psychological consequences for women and families. Crucially, conditional inclusion under these regimes also generates internal hierarchies within communities. Those who achieve relative security—through employment, education, or bureaucratic compliance—may implicitly measure themselves against those who remain vulnerable, reproducing moral distinctions and subtle forms of social uplift.

In some cases, recognition is secured by distancing oneself from others deemed irresponsible, dependent, or unsuccessful. Shame thus operates simultaneously as an external mechanism imposed by the state and an internalised form of governance shaping community relations, self-worth, and judgments about deservingness.

Just as diaspora African women are compelled to perform success to avoid stigma and secure recognition, Western feminist discourse stabilises its moral authority through figures of deficiency. Respectability politics therefore operate across scales, local, diasporic, and global, linking migration governance to feminist epistemologies that sort women into hierarchies of visibility and worth. What persists is a system of conditional protection in which recognition is unevenly distributed, survival is tethered to conformity, and those at the margins are compelled to reproduce the very hierarchies that sustain their exclusion.

Contemporary feminist activism across Kenya, Namibia and the diaspora reveals a fundamental truth: the struggle for African women's bodily autonomy cannot be separated from the ongoing contestation of colonial gendered categories themselves. Whether through Kenyan sex workers challenging their exclusion from national grief, Namibian activists refusing the reduction of gendered violence to a singular "woman," intergenerational negotiations

27. Interview conducted on 3 December 2025

28. Interview conducted on 7 October 2025

of political memory, or diasporic women confronting epistemic displacement within European institutions, each intervention exposes the limits of organising within inherited colonial frameworks. Yet these movements also demonstrate that critique alone is insufficient. The task before feminist organising is not simply to demand inclusion within existing structures, but to dismantle the epistemic foundations upon which those structures rest. This requires refusing the fiction of "woman" as a unified political subject while simultaneously defending the specific vulnerabilities of those most exposed to gendered harm. It demands navigating male allyship without ceding political ground, and challenging archival erasure without reproducing the logic of the ledger. Across scales from the local to the diasporic, from intergenerational memory work to transnational feminist knowledge production, the project of decolonising African women's bodies remains unfinished. What these movements make clear is that liberation cannot be achieved through recognition alone, but only through the patient, contested and collective work of building political worlds in which African women's lives are neither conditional nor exceptional.

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Conclusion

CONCLUSION

This report has argued that the regulation of African women's bodily autonomy has been central—rather than marginal—to the making of modern state power. Across colonial, postcolonial, and European contexts, control over African women's bodies has played a key role in building, stabilising, and reproducing political authority. Under colonial rule, this control was foundational to state formation. Customary law was codified in ways that displaced women from shared authority and strengthened male dominance within the private sphere. Violence against women was selectively recognised, rendering some harms visible while erasing others. Missionary institutions framed African women's bodies as objects of moral reform, linking sexuality, reproduction, and respectability to imperial governance. The denial of bodily autonomy was crucial to empire, as it helped secure labour, naturalise racial hierarchy, and stabilise colonial order.

Formal independence did not dismantle this structure. Instead, it was absorbed into postcolonial state formation. In Namibia and Kenya, religious institutions, legal systems, medical regimes, and public moral discourse continued to regulate women's bodies, now framed in the language of culture, nation, and development rather than empire. Colonial laws and missionary moral frameworks were indigenised rather than abandoned. Even contemporary rights-based and humanitarian interventions often operate within this inherited architecture, shaping which suffering is recognised, which voices are heard, and which claims receive support. At the same time, feminist movements across these contexts expose the limits of these inherited frameworks. In Kenya, activists contest the exclusion of sex workers from national mourning in discussions of femicide. Namibian activists resist narrow definitions of "woman" that erase other forms of vulnerability. Diasporic women confront racialised and gendered expectations within European institutions. These struggles reveal that the colonial construction of "woman" continues to determine whose lives are protected, whose deaths are publicly grieved, and whose authority is acknowledged.

Crucially, these dynamics are not confined to Africa. The moral and racial logics that structured colonial governance were also embedded in European state formation. Early theological debates about who possessed a soul evolved into biological theories of race, but the underlying function remained the same: to define who counted as fully human and who could be exploited, regulated, or excluded. Today, these logics persist in new forms. In Germany, appeals to "Judeo-Christian values" shape debates about belonging and integration.

In the United Kingdom, faith language is mobilised both to defend and to contest restrictive immigration policy. African migrant women encounter expectations of respectability and moral worth through bureaucratic systems that quietly reproduce older hierarchies.

Across contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: African women's bodies remain a key site through which sovereignty is asserted, populations are managed, and social hierarchies are maintained. From

colonial legal codes to postcolonial abortion debates, from medical racism to migration regimes, the control of reproduction, sexuality, and bodily integrity continues to underpin state authority. This continuity reflects not coincidence but the durable architecture of a political order historically built through racialised and gendered regulation.

The implications are significant. Frameworks of rights, development, and protection cannot be assumed to be neutral solutions when they operate within this inherited structure. Too often, they manage harm without addressing its roots, offering conditional inclusion rather than structural transformation. Feminist organising across Kenya, Namibia, and the diaspora points toward a different horizon. Activists challenge archival erasure, resist narrow categories of womanhood, and build forms of solidarity that recognise intersecting vulnerabilities. They insist that bodily autonomy is not simply an individual claim but a political struggle embedded in broader systems of power.

Liberation, as these movements suggest, cannot be achieved through recognition alone. It cannot rest on inclusion within institutions shaped by colonial logics. The struggle for African women's bodily autonomy is inseparable from a broader decolonial project: it is a struggle against a state form built through the control of reproduction, sexuality, and bodily integrity in service of capitalist accumulation and racialised order. It is a struggle against epistemic frameworks that render African women's suffering either cultural, exceptional, or invisible. It is a struggle against conditional belonging that grants recognition only to those who conform to dominant norms of respectability, domesticity, and moral worth. And it is a struggle for something else: for political worlds in which African women's

lives are grievable, their voices authoritative, their knowledge actionable, and their bodies autonomous. This is the unfinished work that this report has sought to illuminate, and it is the work to which feminist organising across Kenya, Namibia, and the diaspora remains urgently and necessarily committed.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this report demonstrate that constraints on African women's bodily autonomy are produced through distinct yet interconnected national, diasporic, and institutional contexts. While colonial afterlives operate transnationally, effective interventions must be grounded in specific governance regimes, legal frameworks, and social norms. The following recommendations are therefore structured by cross-cutting priorities relevant across contexts, by countries.

1. Rethink epistemological frameworks in policy and advocacy

Across contexts, policymakers, donors, and NGOs must critically interrogate the epistemological assumptions shaping gender, violence, and bodily autonomy frameworks. Western feminist lenses that universalise fixed categories of "woman," "victim," or "empowerment" risk reproducing colonial forms of misrecognition. Policy must instead centre African ways of knowing that recognise history, relationality, and context.

2. Move from fixed identities to relational understandings of gender and harm

Gender should not be treated as a static or singular identity category. African gender systems have historically been relational, situational, and embedded within kinship, community, and moral economies. Policies that rely on rigid identity categories risk erasing women's lived realities and reproducing colonial hierarchies of visibility.

3. Embed colonial accountability across governance systems

Advancing bodily autonomy requires confronting colonial legacies embedded in law, medicine, religion, humanitarian governance, and knowledge production. States and international institutions should formally acknowledge these histories and integrate them into policy design, monitoring, and evaluation.

4. Strengthen transnational feminist and diasporic solidarity

Formal alliances should be fostered between African feminist movements and diasporic organisations across Europe and Africa to coordinate advocacy on asylum reform, healthcare discrimination, and accountability for gendered harm. Transnational solidarity must be built on mutual epistemic recognition rather than policy transfer or replication.

1. KENYA

- Integrate historical accountability into reproductive and sexual health governance

Reproductive health and sexuality education policies should explicitly acknowledge the colonial and missionary interventions that reshaped African family life, sexuality, and motherhood. Curricula must shift away from moralistic instruction toward historically grounded, rights-affirming approaches that reflect women's lived realities and relational social worlds.

- Decolonise GBV response frameworks and survivor support

National GBV strategies should move beyond narrow, carceral models and Western therapeutic that individualise harm and prescribe linear pathways to recovery. **Policy should support survivor-centred interventions grounded in African epistemologies of care, relational accountability, and collective healing.** These include community-based practices such as storytelling, ritual, song, embodied expression, and restorative approaches that recognise harm as social rather than purely individual.

2. NAMIBIA

- Re-politicise GBV as a structural and historical issue

GBV policy frameworks should be reviewed to assess how they depoliticise violence by framing it as cultural, individual, or behavioural rather than as a legacy of colonial governance, racial capitalism, and land dispossession. Policy should support decolonial feminist interventions that explicitly link violence to economic precarity, historical injustice, and state power.

- Reduce donor gatekeeping in feminist and GBV advocacy

The Namibian state, in partnership with regional bodies, should establish independent funding mechanisms for gender justice initiatives that are not bound by international donor mandates. This would enable organisations to pursue structurally transformative interventions—such as offender registries, community accountability mechanisms, and legal reform—without being constrained by donor respectability norms.

3. UNITED KINGDOM

- Address racialised medical governance and reproductive harm

The Department of Health and Social Care should mandate race-conscious medical training

that addresses the historical exclusion of people of African descent from clinical research and pain assessment standards. Clear accountability mechanisms must be established when African women's bodily experiences are dismissed or mismanaged within healthcare systems.

- **Counter homogenising representations of African migrant women**

Government communication and media regulation bodies should challenge narratives that collapse African migrants into a singular category. Policy discourse must distinguish between national, gendered, and historical experiences, ensuring that women's specific harms are not obscured by generic migrant framings.

4. GERMANY

- **Move beyond symbolic decolonisation toward institutional accountability**

German state institutions, universities, and cultural bodies should extend decolonial frameworks beyond heritage and restitution initiatives to address contemporary gendered harms affecting African women in healthcare, education, asylum systems, and GBV responses.

- **Decolonise survivor support services and funding frameworks**

State- and foundation-funded programmes should be required to meaningfully incorporate Decolonial/African feminist and community-led approaches to healing. Funding criteria must allow for non-clinical, collective, and embodied forms of care—including peer-led support, oral memory work, ritual, and culturally grounded practices—rather than treating them as supplementary or informal.

- **Address respectability politics and intra-community hierarchies**

Policy should support Decolonial/African/Feminist organisations that challenge shame, stigma, and internalised hierarchies within diasporic communities. Anti-racism and GBV frameworks must explicitly name respectability politics as a mechanism that disciplines women through conditional belonging rather than protection.

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Unfinished Freedom: Persistence of Colonial Gendered Governance and the
Contemporary Feminist Efforts to Contest It