Women's Organising in Nigeria During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with Azeenarh Mohammed, Buky Williams and Chitra Nagarajan

African women have long organised for different purposes and so it has been with the pandemic. In different parts of the continent, women have come together to address different problems thrown up by the pandemic. One of the major fallouts has been gender-based violence (GBV). Across the globe, the incidence of GBV has risen in all the countries for which there is available data. State efforts to address this increased rate of violence, particularly on the African continent, have, however, been abysmal. Civil society organisations and women's rights movements have been at the forefront of advocating for increased attention to the issue of GBV in the midst of the pandemic. One country in which there has been a concerted effort to address GBV is Nigeria. There, members of the Nigerian Feminist Forum worked assiduously to raise the issue of GBV during the pandemic and to insist that states address it in a significant way. A second area of focus for the feminist movement in Nigeria during this period was police brutality, which is clearly linked to human rights and, specifically, women's rights. In addition to the work on GBV, Nigerian feminists also worked to address the abuse that Nigerian citizens faced at the hands of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) through the End SARS movement. This movement showed the power of women's activism in action and garnered international attention towards the end of 2020. In this conversation, Akosua K. Darkwah speaks with three active members of the Nigerian Feminist Forum – Azeenarh Mohammed, Buky Williams and Chitra Nagarajan – to gain insight into the work that the Nigerian feminist movement did to address the needs of women during the pandemic. These three women were also instrumental in the production of an OSIWA-funded report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender roles and relations in Nigeria (Nagarajan, 2020), which will also be discussed briefly.

The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Why don't we start with you telling me a little bit about yourselves?

Azeenarh Mohammed: I run a feminist organisation called The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs), which works, basically, for women, LGBT folks and other minorities.
Buky Williams: I am the Executive Director of Education as a Vaccine, which is an organisation that works to advance the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and young people.

Chitra Nagarajan: I work on issues of human rights, conflict, peacebuilding, and climate change. My mission is to inject feminism into mainstream peace and security spaces.

Akosua K. Darkwah: If I understand correctly, all three of you are part of the Nigerian Feminist Forum?

Azeenarh Mohammed: Yes, we are all part of the Feminist Forum, but we're also part of a bigger feminist network in Nigeria because the feminist network is larger than the Feminist Forum.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Can you clarify for me, then, what the Feminist Forum does and what the larger network does?

Azeenarh Mohammed: The Nigerian Feminist Forum is an existing organisation, which does certain work, and then there's the broader feminist network which encompasses much more than what the Nigerian Feminist Forum does. So, if you talk about the Nigerian Feminist Forum, you're talking about a particular organisation, but if you're talking about feminist organising, it's much bigger than that and encompasses thousands of Nigerian women engaged in feminist organising.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Okay. Can you tell me then about your individual involvement in work on violence against women and girls in Nigeria?

Chitra Nagarajan: I've been working on issues of violence against women and girls in Nigeria for a long time. My work is primarily in conflict-affected communities

– strengthening systems, supporting service providers, and trying to change attitudes of security agents towards violence.

Buky Williams: The work we do at Education as a Vaccine is at two levels. At state level, we advocate for the implementation of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 in the states where it does not exist. At community level, we offer training to staff of sexual assault referral centres and run safe spaces.

Akosua K. Darkwah: And Azeenarh?

Azeenarh Mohammed: At TIERs, we provide responses to violence that is meted out to people in relation either to their gender identity or their sexual orientation, and also offer referral services and support to women who have been victims of violence.

Akosua K. Darkwah: What would you say some of your successes have been in the work that you do?

Buky Williams: One major success is the work we have done to ensure that community structures can respond to issues of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in a youth-friendly manner. We're also currently working in two states around the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act.

Azeenarh Mohammed: Part of the success that we've been able to build over the past few years has been trying to connect the LGBTI community to the wider feminist movement, and in that way, being able to internally check problematic things that have been known to happen within both the LGBTI and larger feminist community, such as sexism and homophobia.

Chitra Nagarajan: As a researcher, it's good to see my research reflected back to me in terms of the narratives that the NGO community is now using, and also how that then influences programming. I would also say what gives me joy is more defined successes: for example, seeing services improved, with greater provision to survivors, and better outreach. For example, last year, in an Internally Displaced Persons Camp in Borno, our advocacy efforts led to the leaders taking firm action to stop sexual exploitation from happening. For me, that's success. I would like to say that one

thing Azeenarh and Buky missed, when they were talking about successes, was the state of emergency regarding GBV that was declared in Nigeria earlier this year. Really, it was the feminist movement as a whole that was responsible for pushing this forward. I think that's really important, and it directly links to COVID-19 as well.

Buky Williams: Indeed. At the beginning of COVID-19, one of the things that we realised was happening in Nigeria was that nobody was taking sexual or gender-based violence seriously. To be quite honest, no one was really prepared. Sexual violence services were not considered essential and so there were no passes for service providers. We had no data to justify the need to the COVID-19 taskforce. We also saw really high-profile cases of young women who were killed. For a lot of us in the civil society movement, we were just really frustrated by the lack of response by the State.

That spurred us on to act and we came together as feminists to call for a state of emergency. That really picked up and blew up and people really got engaged and involved, you know. Governors' wives were pushing from one end, various civil society organisations were pushing from their end and governors were declaring states of emergency. Eventually, the House of Representatives put forward different resolutions and the government created an inter-ministerial committee.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Tell me more about the Violence Against Persons Act that was passed in 2015. To what extent would you say the Nigerian state is actually implementing the law that it has passed?

Buky Williams: To be quite honest, I'm going to say it's been very slow going. I think one of the biggest things was actually getting the law passed because it took over 14 years. And then when it got passed, it was really only in the Federal Capital Territory and in order for it to become national law, over two-thirds of the states actually have to pass it. Before COVID-19, depending on who you asked, 12 to 13 states had passed it at the time. And even though it had been passed, there was still a lot of work to be done in order to be able to actually ensure that it had an impact on the lives of all persons. We need Sexual Assault Referral Centres, for example. There are not enough across the country. That was part of the demands that were made when we talked about the state of emergency: the need to domesticate the

laws and for support systems to be put in place to be able to respond to SGBV, ensure that there are disciplinary measures in place for law enforcement officials who refused to assist survivors, ensure there are shelters, those kinds of things.

Akosua K. Darkwah: You talked about 12 to 13 states having passed it before COVID-19. Do you have any sense of what the numbers are like now?

Buky Williams: The numbers now are about 15. We've added about three more states.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Is it safe to say that this is one of the silver linings of COVID-19?

Azeenarh Mohammed: I think that would be stretching it. It's, I think, best to put it as a success of years of advocacy and pushing for it. I don't think COVID-19 added anything to be able to pass it in a couple more states.

Buky Williams: To some extent, though, I think I would say that what COVID-19 did was to amplify the issue of SGBV. I think the fact that there were so many conversations about it, and there were so many high-profile cases, and even governors had to say something about it, that was different. There was a lot of shame, especially among the governors' wives whose husbands hadn't passed it, especially when, thanks to the State of Emergency GBV campaign, maps showing which states had passed it and which states had not passed it were shared. So, COVID-19 definitely gave states a little more reason to pass it to show that they were actually doing something. I'm not saying that it's due to COVID-19, I'm just saying that COVID-19, like many things that are unfortunate, created an amplifying effect that gave more possibility of pushing forward this need to have legal frameworks in place to be able to respond to SGBV.

Akosua K. Darkwah: What were the circumstances under which the three of you came together to work on the OSIWA-funded report?

Azeenarh Mohammed: All three of us have worked together on various projects, and we know that we have the same beliefs, and we have identified gaps over the years on things that we wanted to work on; so, when this opportunity presented

itself, we all took advantage of it to pitch in to produce the report because we believed in its importance.

Buky Williams: The truth of the matter is that we definitely have similar values and principles and we wanted to be able to dig deeper into issues that most people often think about, but not in an inclusive manner. Even before this work that OSIWA supported, we had thought about the idea of what an inclusive, gender-sensitive response to COVID-19 would be, because we could see that the Nigerian government was not even thinking about a gendered response, let alone an inclusive one. So, when Chitra came to us and said there was the possibility of being able to do more in-depth research, it was a no-brainer.

Chitra Nagarajan: I think we first started talking about this back in March 2020, when we saw what was happening in other countries and we began to get an indication of the gendered effects in terms of GBV, unpaid care work, and the impact on maternal mortality or access to abortion. All these are issues that we care about, but there wasn't that much discussion in Nigeria about the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and also what the response needed to be. And so we put together a policy paper – Buky and I together with Charmaine [Pereira], back in April 2020 – sketching out some of what we thought would happen in Nigeria and what the government needed to do. And then, on the back of that, we decided to put together a series of briefing papers because, at that time, many of the feminists that we knew were so focused on what was happening and trying to develop contingency plans for providing services to survivors that there was little time to reflect and write and document. And so, we wanted to put together something that would draw on feminist knowledge from across the country, to present documentation that drew from across the nation, and was influenced by feminist analysis. We were also interested in something that was as intersectional as we could make it. So, we're not just looking at impacts based on gender, but also issues around disability and sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Akosua K. Darkwah: What, for you, were the most surprising things you found in putting together the report?

Chitra Nagarajan: I work so much in the space that I'm not sure too much surprises me, actually, but maybe I could say things that were not in the public sphere in Nigeria about the impact of COVID-19 on GBV were the new pieces of information. People were more or less knowledgeable, I think, about sexual violence and even intimate partner violence, but not necessarily about potential impacts of COVID-19 on early and forced marriage, on FGM, and then also violence in same-sex relationships, the increase in corrective rape of lesbian and bisexual women, how the pandemic was affecting LGBTQI people, etc. I think those were the new issues that our paper brought to the fore. These issues were not discussed in feminist and sexual violence spaces.

Buky Williams: I wouldn't say I was surprised by anything. I would say that it was important for this to be documented.

Azeenarh Mohammed: What really surprised me was how ill-prepared the government was. Even far into the pandemic, the people who were actually tasked with the job of response just left us hanging. Even though we were hearing the gendered aspects of what came out of COVID-19 in the reports from other countries around the world, we just seemed to be unprepared. Even when feminist groups tried to engage with the state and tried to ensure that certain services were in place, many states still just fought back or pushed back or were just uninterested. That took me a little by surprise.

Akosua K. Darkwah: So, what kinds of data did you draw on for this report? How did you go about finding the information, especially since you did the research during the time of COVID-19?

Chitra Nagarajan: It was very difficult because there isn't actually much data, all these months afterwards, and again, this is one of the failures, the gaps that the pandemic has exposed – the lack of a proper data-gathering system. And with the data that exists, I'm not sure how reliable it is because it seems to be taken from approximations. It was very difficult to come across figures on reporting even when we contacted service providers to ask for the number of cases that they had received monthly in the past year. There is some of that in the report, but most of the information came from talking to people working in the violence against women

space to find out the kinds of cases coming to them, as well as what they were hearing from the community, and the constraints they faced in doing prevention work and providing services during this time.

Akosua K. Darkwah: So how then did women's groups respond to this new reality of the ways in which COVID-19 worsened the lives of marginalised communities?

Buky Williams: To be quite honest, I think it wasn't easy. So, just to give an example: in Abuja, the question was whether service providers would be able to move during restrictions – would they be able to get passes to enable them to move, and would they get Personal Protective Equipment to be able to protect themselves during COVID-19? Some colleagues were going out anyway to ensure that survivors were moved out of harm's way and were being harassed by law enforcement officials as they did that. There was lobbying on a case-by-case basis for the government to give passes to those who were providing services, but that took time to get. A lot of the work moved online. Groups like ours publicised phone numbers on SMS platforms to ensure that people could still call for help if they had access to their own mobile phones.

There were cases recorded online and we had to follow through with them to identify which services were available, and co-raise funds as needed to really ensure that we could respond, but the truth of the matter is some services were no longer available and some shelters closed down because they said that they could not take people in during COVID-19 unless they were tested. That is literally what happened until the government eased restrictions [in late May, early June depending on the state]. A lot of people were stuck with their abusers, even if they sought for help, until something could be done about that, and that was really frustrating. The issue of data was also a really critical issue. I mean, we had been talking since March about how to create a centralised data system to improve the coordination between service providers and social welfare officers who receive the reports, but the situation room was not launched until late in November 2020.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Did you have to come up with new strategies for your work in this time period?

Azeenarh Mohammed: I would say that we've had to adapt to the realities of the day instead of coming up with new strategies. The ways in which we worked were no longer possible; the tools we relied on had to be adjusted and adapted to deal with the reality of COVID-19, and we also had to learn to access new spaces. Buky gave the example of how we resorted to more online campaigning, and how Chioma from TechHer, with the support of other groups, drew a map, which then gave people a visual impression of the issue.

Now, because a lot of people were at home relying on their devices, instead of diversifying our resources, we could concentrate and target people in the spaces where they were operating, and that map, for example, created a wall of shame that made such a huge impact. People now started advocating within their spaces saying, "Oh I didn't know that my state had not domesticated the law, and I'm going to push to ensure that it happens." To a certain extent, it also allowed various women's rights groups, and people working for minorities, to collaborate and see how they could work better. I know that, at least, in the south of Nigeria where I work, the ways that we ran safe spaces and shelters needed a little bit of adjustment. So, we haven't changed; we have basically adapted and adjusted.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Buky, would you say the same thing?

Buky Williams: Definitely, because I think a lot of us were already functioning online. It was just really adapting it to be able to respond and finding different ways, because it was not just like in normal times where you would be able to refer people easily. It was a lot of work figuring out what was feasible in this situation. As always, we had to leverage personal relationships to know who to call and so on. We also were disturbing the peace in certain WhatsApp groups where we knew there were government officials, getting them annoyed so as to be able to highlight some of these issues. There were all of these things that we had to do and then of course, there were the endless Zoom meetings!

Akosua K. Darkwah: Would you say you've developed new relationships with groups that work on violence against girls and women in this time period?

Azeenarh Mohammed: I personally haven't, and I don't think the folks at TIERs have either, but Chitra, who spent most of the time researching the issue, might be able to speak more firmly and clearly on that.

Chitra Nagarajan: I think there was some level of people coming together on the issue of violence against girls, particularly at the state level, even before the pandemic and, as far as I'm aware, that continued. I don't know what Buky thinks, but I haven't really seen people coming together in ways that they were not before. And then, of course, you had feminists coming together around the state of emergency so, maybe, that was the new kind of collaboration.

Buky Williams: I would say the one particular issue we came together to address was the lack of a database of service providers across the country. There wasn't anywhere you could go to find somewhere to refer people to if they called you from any part of the country seeking services, and we really needed that during COVID-19. So, in the Federal Capital Territory, UNDP and Women in Africa called meetings to discuss this, and we started to collect and collate this information. I don't think we had been able to bring that many people together at the national level in a long while. The meetings died down over time, but the information that was collected exists.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Right. So, if I said, look beyond 2021, what would you hope would have changed?

Chitra Nagarajan: Before we get to that, I really think that we can't discuss the pandemic without talking about the End SARS movement which happened during the pandemic, given that feminist activists were really part of the mobilisation, trying to make the links between campaigning against police brutality and women's rights. Buky and Azeenarh, you guys were really involved in it, would you like to say anything?

Buky Williams: Where to start on that one? COVID-19 really amplified the level of frustration with the government and its mismanagement of things. Let's go back in terms of even the work that we're doing in highlighting gender and COVID-19, and the fact that even to date the government and taskforce are still doing a very

poor job of integrating gender into their response. What people are demanding in the End SARS movement is very simple: we want an end to the brutality from a very specific segment of the Nigerian police. But we also have to remember that we saw this brutality happen during COVID-19, in which there were deaths during the enforcement of restrictions. No matter what state you were in, market women were shot; I know service providers who were harassed at different checkpoints when moving about to provide services, even when they showed a pass. A lot of that happened. Even women who needed to give birth or who needed to visit the hospital for various things were still facing a lot of harassment and a lot of extortion. The case of the man whose car was taken over by SARS just raised this issue again. There was a very clear message to the government: we want you to close down the units. Young people really drove that movement and seeing the power of young women really come alive in terms of coordination and support was amazing. They contributed in a way that shows that when women, who have been fighting this battle for centuries, come together, really amazing things happen. The way the government clamped down and responded just showed that they're not ready to listen to the citizens of this country. They're not ready to change in any way, shape or form. They say they're addressing the concerns of the End SARS movement, while still arresting protesters, while still blaming them for the looting and the unrest. For me, this just shows that our government is not capable of responding to crises and not capable of responding to the changing times. All they really care about is themselves and staying in power.

Azeenarh Mohammed: So, for me, one of my big takeaways from this was actually from a post that I had seen from someone who said that for the first time in Nigeria, the word "feminist" is on everybody's lips, in every newspaper, and it is not in a negative way. For the longest time in Nigeria, people have seen feminism or the F word generally as something that we should be ashamed of using and we have clamped down on people who identified as feminist. Nigerians have taken feminism to mean misandry or trying to destroy women, lesbians who kill children, and all the negative ways in which feminism can be seen.

However, during the End SARS movement, all of a sudden, being a feminist was seen as a good thing because at the forefront of the organising was the Feminist Coalition, a group of young women who just took charge and everybody could

see how transparent they were, how proactive they were in many other spaces. So, there was, all of a sudden, an acknowledgement that feminism meant more than how they had perceived it. And people were more open to identifying as feminist or supporting the work that feminists did. And while they were involved with the protests, they also actively tried to push feminist discourse, one of justice and equality and diversity and acceptance. So, for me, that was the big takeaway, and it was a big deal because we were in the middle of COVID-19, and people decided that COVID-19 was not the biggest issue. Even at the time that COVID-19 was destroying the lives of Nigerians, this organisation or group of police that have been brutalising people for such a long time was a worthy cause for young people, for human rights advocates to organise around and to be able to push for change. And we saw how effective that was in bringing the government to the table for at least two to three weeks before there was a brutal clampdown using force and violence by the State. So, I think 2020 is going to be significantly remembered for COVID-19, but it will also be remembered for the End SARS movement and the role that not just feminists, but young feminist women, played in that.

Chitra Nagarajan: Absolutely. And I think for me, it's very telling that the two biggest movements or topics of conversation in Nigeria in 2020, the state of emergency and the End SARS movement, had feminists at the forefront. I agree with Buky and Azeenarh: End SARS was integral to the feminist struggle, and feminists were integral to End SARS.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Would it be a fair assessment to say that, in Nigeria, the year 2020 was about COVID-19, but also women rising up and saying they've had enough?

Buky Williams: I would say it's not that women haven't been rising up to say "enough". I think, though, that for the first time, there was the recognition of the organising and mobilising power of women who have been saying "enough is enough". A friend of mine pointed out that the fact that women have been organising around the issue for a long time made us more effective in being able to coordinate, and in getting everyone to understand the issues, and what could be done. I mean, the ability of the Feminist Coalition to raise so much money within

two weeks[1], and then to disburse it to so many different groups, and to get together a legal network to respond as people were bringing up issues and needs, was pretty incredible. I think it just showed what feminist organising looked like in ways that Nigerians had not respected or seen as beneficial to them.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Right. So, it wasn't so much that this was new. It was that, for the first time, the larger community began to appreciate what this work is important for and what this work can do for them, whether they were feminist or not.

Buky Williams: Yeah, but you know, I think we should also strike a note of caution that this also came with a lot of backlash. A lot of vitriol was levelled against the Feminist Coalition for releasing a statement saying that everyone needed to be respected and that queer people were part of the movement. They were told to focus on the issues at hand. A lot of people used that as a reason to discredit them. A lot of people who were sympathetic towards them – even some feminists – were saying that the statement was the beginning of the end. That's how the government ended up cracking down on them. That was a divisive phase, and it was really frustrating. There was so much vitriol targeted at them, so we haven't fixed it yet, but at least, we must recognise that there is a different level of respect. And, we have a new narrative that we can use whenever they want to come at us with their nonsense.

Akosua K. Darkwah: Yes. I think this is the perfect place to end the conversation. Thank you ever so much.

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1 Chiedo Nwankwor and Elor Nkereuwem note that the Feminist Coalition raised the equivalent of US$388, 000 over a two-week period (Nwankwor and Nkereuwem, 2020).

Intimate Archives: Rethinking Gender in African Studies

Srila Roy and Caio Simões De Araújo speak with Simidele Dosekun, Oluwakemi M. Balogun and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué

On 14 April 2021, the *Governing Intimacies: Sexualities, Gender and Governance in the Postcolonial World* research project, convened by Associate Professor Srila Roy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, hosted a webinar discussion between Oluwakemi M. Balogun (University of Oregon), Simidele Dosekun (London School of Economics), and Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué (University of Wisconsin) about their recently published books: *Beauty Diplomacy: Embodying an Emerging Nation* (Balogun, 2020); *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (Dosekun, 2020), and *Gender, Separatist Politics and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (Mougoué, 2019). The webinar was organised and hosted by Professor Srila Roy and Dr Caio Simões De Araújo.

The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Simidele Dosekun: Thank you very much, Srila, for the invitation to be here today and to be in conversation with Jacqueline and Kemi. It's a particular pleasure to be here, it's enriching and affirming actually, because all our work is in close conversation.

To briefly introduce my book, it is about young, hyper-stylised, class-privileged Nigerian women in the city of Lagos who dress in what I call a "spectacularly feminine style". I mean "spectacularly feminine" mostly in a descriptive sense: it refers to a style of dress characterised by the use of heavy makeup, long weaves and wigs, false nails, false eyelashes and the highest of heels and so on. The central question of the book is, "What kind of femininity is being performed in and through this style?" or, more simply put, "How does the stylised subject, whom I refer to as 'the spectacularly feminine Lagos woman', see herself, as what

kind of gendered self and otherwise constituted self?" To answer these questions, I conducted interviews in 2013 with 18 women in Lagos who dress in the style. What I very much heard from them is that, individually and all the more so in combination, the different elements of their dress, the different fashion and beauty technologies, promise to beautify, to feminise and thereby to armour and bolster a woman. The women whom I interviewed suggested or explained that the dress gives, or at least promises to give, self-confidence; it "empowers", in short.

But, according to these women, not just any woman can do the style or pull it off. To successfully achieve and embody the spectacularly feminine look is not easy; it is hard work, it is expensive, it requires know-how, as well as the "right" dispositions and mentalities. For instance, echoing common stereotypes that women who are highly invested in fashion and beauty are shallow, superficial and so on, the women in my project sought to dissociate from this by saying, "I'm not that type of woman, I'm not shallow, I have depth, I have substance."

So putting all this together, in the book I argue that both for what the spectacular style of dress promises and for being the kinds of women able to do the style, the women I interviewed see themselves as not merely empowered but also self-empowering in and through their style of dress. I read or frame all this in terms of the concept of "postfeminism". By postfeminism, I mean a popular, highly mediated, highly consumerist cultural formation and sensibility concerning the putative pastness and redundancy of feminism for certain kinds of women, for women who are "already empowered".

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: Thank you so much, Srila, for inviting me. I want to echo what Simi said, that the synergies between our work are really gratifying. In my book, I make an argument around a key concept: "beauty diplomacy". What got me interested in the topic of beauty pageants in Nigeria was that I was visiting the country and noticed that pageants were really part of the urban landscape, specifically in Lagos. I was interested in the ways in which beauty pageants were being used to promote not only expected elements like fashion and cosmetics, but also other industries such as tourism, as well as social issues like peace, and the nation too.

In the book, I start off with the celebration around Nigeria winning the 2001 Miss World pageant, which was also the very first time a Black woman of African descent won – Agbani Darego. There was a lot of celebration and optimism about the win,

and politicians and government officials were lauding it as an example of Nigeria's future trajectory. I use this example as a way of making sense of, and laying the foundation for, the concept of "beauty diplomacy", which refers to the fact that the work that women do in the beauty pageant industry, particularly beauty queens, is seen as a way of promoting positive images of Nigeria as a country, especially in a context where the global narrative around Nigeria is so negative. I tie the idea of beauty diplomacy to the concept of "aesthetic capital", specifically exploring the ways in which beauty queens have to present themselves as having "the total package", that is, not just physical beauty but also internal dispositions that are seen as virtuous, and as responsible. They also have to show that they are upwardly mobile and that they are making moves to better their own lives and careers, as well as better the lives of others, working for the public social good. Speaking to the question of "empowerment", oftentimes this was represented through the idea of having a voice, having a particular office that beauty queens work to cultivate, in terms of leveraging their title to not only do charity work but to also try to lobby politicians to focus on particular social issues that they are passionate about. In such ways, the contestants would often flip stereotypes about beauty queens being insignificant, shallow, disempowered and so on, claiming, "I have this voice and this access that I find to be empowering."

At the same time, I argue that the kind of access to power the beauty queens claim, and the idea that succeeding in beauty pageants is self-empowering for the contestants, has different kinds of costs and tensions. Oftentimes, the beauty contestants would tell me that, given the public attention they received, they had very high expectations around their access to economic capital: they have to dress in particular ways, they are expected to drive specific types of cars, and these kinds of things were difficult because they didn't always have the cash to back up such economic expectations. They would also talk about the public scrutiny that came with their fame: they wouldn't want to do things like take a public bus, for instance, because if they are seen on a public bus, they ran the risk of being splashed in the tabloids. This is part of the argument that I make around gender and power in the book, thinking about how "beauty diplomacy" gives the contestants some semblance of mobility and access to social capital and social networks, but is also truncated and constrained.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: Thank you, Srila and Caio. I'm really excited to be here today, especially with two amazing scholars whose work I really admire and whose work my students have also read. We've talked at length about these issues, beauty politics, and how various ideas about race, gender and class – we have to talk about class – shape ideas about being feminine, being an "ideal woman", within African settings.

My book focuses on two main themes: gender and everyday nationalism. I wanted to highlight how women's everyday, ordinary actions were politicised in Cameroon in the 1960s and in the early 1970s. These everyday actions play a role in political movements that are often seen and remembered in history as having men at the forefront. One of the things that I uncovered, and was surprised about, was that women's roles and political movements are not always radical and overt but instead can be conservative and subtle and, to be very clear, still make a profound and lasting impact.

The women I focus on in the book are formally educated women, female political elites and government officials' wives. These women worked within patriarchal confines when trying to achieve two multilayered goals. The first was to advance women's social and political rights. The second was to play a key role in the larger, Anglophone nationalist political movement and project of identity-building in Cameroon in the 1960s and early 1970s. These women did not label themselves as "feminists". But I maintain in the book that they engage with what some gender studies scholars call "feminist actions", behaviours that supported women's advancement and equality in diverse areas of their lives.

I argue that the formally educated women my work focuses on accessed social and political power by invoking what I call "embodied nationalism". I understand this as a type of nationalism in which individuals embody identity through performance, emotional expression, and visual representation. The elite women believed that women's everyday patterns of behaviour and comportment might project a suitable Anglophone persona – the clothes that women wore, the foods that they cooked, their refraining from gossip, whether or not they followed appropriate marital behaviour such as not challenging their husbands' male authority by chasing them in public, or beating their husbands' mistresses! They also believed that all this mattered for Anglophone women to distinguish themselves from French-speaking Cameroonian women like myself. I can tell you that doing oral interviews was quite interesting. For example, I would have people look me in the eye and say

French-speaking women from Cameroon don't know how to cook and clean, and consequently, I tried to defend myself by saying, "I can cook and also clean!" So, in short, I argue that the educated female elite invoked embodied nationalism to construct visual representations and emotional or affective practices of ideal Anglophone womanhood within urban settings. So how women *feel* matters. This is one of the things I love about Simi and Kemi's work in terms of how we're all looking at beauty politics; that it is not just about what women are wearing, it's also about their internal psyche: how does one feel? How does one connect one's emotions to one's clothing and so on?

Caio Simões De Araújo: Thank you so much to all the speakers. One question we have received from the audience is for Kemi, asking whether, in light of the riots following the Miss World pageant in Abuja and Kaduna in 2002, you address the sense in which beauty pageants point to divides within Nigeria on the basis of region and religion. The second question could be for you all. It is whether the women you researched were performing a kind of self-empowering agency of the type that Saba Mahmood described in her book, *Politics of Piety* (2011), the kind of agency that inhabits the norm and is not against it. And if this is the case, what implications does this strategy have for the struggle of women in the Global South?

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: I have a chapter in my book where I talk specifically about the Miss World protests and what happened in 2002, where I spin out some of the competing ways in which women's bodies were framed by both those in support of the pageant and those opposed to it. I show that both camps rely on similar narratives of women's bodies needing to be protected symbolically. So women's bodies become a rhetorical tool for thinking about national perspectives, and thinking about the ways in which national identities and ideas about the nation are always going to be contested and fraught – and, in this case, speak to some of the faultlines in Nigeria around region, religion, ethnicity, different interpretations of "culture" and of the trajectory that Nigeria should or shouldn't take.

Simidele Dosekun: The question about agency is quite a useful one. It helps me articulate a question that I also had for Jacqueline - the question being about the nature, and we could even say the effects or results of the kind of performance

of agency and self-empowerment that the women in both our projects were performing, or in Jacqueline's case study, advocating for other women. Were all these women challenging or inhabiting the norm? Maybe it's an unsatisfactory answer, but I think the answer is a bit of both. Certainly, I am very ambivalent about a lot of the things that I heard from the women whom I interviewed, and Jacqueline, to connect it to your work, you often use a phrase like "progressive but conservative" to describe the women in your project. I think, in Kemi's project as well, in a different kind of way, it's like women are pushing forward certain kinds of norms, certain kinds of ideas about women's rights and women's opportunities and so on, but at the same time there's a deep strain of conservatism as well.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: Yes, it is indeed a really important question because it really does highlight many tensions in how agency is connected to body politics and even political structures. As a historian, I thought it was essential to highlight how women at the time I was researching might have identified themselves, and to try to not connect that too much to how I understood what feminism is today, and also to realise that the women's actions may not be radical and overt in terms of them being out on the street. But, still, they are making changes nevertheless, in very subtle ways.

In my work, what we see are women's organisations choosing to affiliate themselves with male-dominated parties, to get funding, for example, and they use that funding to train women to become politicians, to start sports organisations for women. Once, when I was presenting this work, much earlier on, someone in the audience said these are not feminist actions, and I had to emphasise that we're talking about feminist actions within African settings and that it unravels in different ways. Ideas about feminist actions vary and are based on different factors such as socio-economic positioning.

Caio Simões De Araújo: There is another question for Kemi, asking for your position on the argument on whether beauty contests solicit women's conformity to Eurocentric standards of beauty, especially in the context that you mentioned, of the Miss World Pageant. And then there's a question for Simi, asking for your thoughts on how trans women can be read within a postfeminist framework. I just want to also add a comment to that. In my own research, I did interview quite a few trans women in Mozambique and I found quite fascinating that what you

describe is very much the discourse that I heard from them as well, in terms of beauty as an armour. I think that's another fascinating point.

Srila Roy: There's another question: "Would it be possible to characterise these kinds of feminism as distinctly African?" If I can just tag on my question here, too. I am really interested in the spectre of feminism that's haunting this conversation: it's come out a little more now in the discussion, this sense that the subjects in all your work might be "insufficiently" or "inadequately" feminist, if at all. I wonder: what are the kinds of expectations that feminism evokes? What is the spectre of feminism that we are invoking when we're judging the subjects as being insufficiently radical or "bad", and so on? Yet another question on feminism: "To what extent does feminism as a politics emerging in the 1960s, reanimated in the 1990s, function as a kind of foil against which women in your studies can assert moral authority or membership in a moral community?"

Oluwakemi M. Balogun: I do think it's interesting that, in all of our cases, there's ways in which access to power is – I think Simi has already mentioned – constrained within a system. The ways in which the women talk about access to power is very much individualised, it's very much about this self-empowerment route, about one gaining access to particular forms of power. Maybe there is something about the fact that all of us are also talking about women who are on the whole pretty privileged. What does that mean in terms of access to power and the forms of feminist politics in which one engages?

I think the reference to Saba Mahmood's work (2011) is really helpful because there are ways of thinking about agency that might not on its face be seen as resistance, and what do we make of that in terms of power, what do we make of that in terms of particular forms of feminist politics? I think there's something to be said for how that allows us to reimagine feminism outside of a Western gaze.

In response to the question on Eurocentrism, I definitely think the critique around global pageants as Eurocentric is a fair one, because if we look at the winners over time, there are certain patterns we see. Even though, now, those that are considered to be the most competitive tend to be from the Global South, from countries like Venezuela or the Philippines, there is a critique that even those

who win at national levels in these and other countries in the Global South tend to be lighter-skinned. In the context of Nigeria, I found that the question of pageants sending contestants, whether lighter- or darker-skinned, to the global competition was more strategic than I assumed. The pageant organisers would often tell me that, for example, having a darker skinned contestant at particular pageants was more competitive because the global pageants expected Nigerian contestants to be darker. And that was some kind of a leg up because it made the contestants more "exotically" beautiful. So it didn't pan out universally that only lighter-skinned contestants won.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: I want to add to what Kemi was saying and take us back to the 1960s; in the chapter in my book on beauty pageants, there is an awareness about an increasingly global idea about what beauty norms are, not only for women but for Black women specifically. The audience at the beauty pageants I consider in the book would say, "We want someone dark-skinned with an Afro," and then, if that person didn't win, people would be writing letters to their local officials talking about the pageants being rigged. I think it's also important to know or talk about how participants beyond the contestants themselves are engaging in conversations about Black beauty. In the 1960s, they also responded to what was going on among African Americans in the US and ideas about the "Black is beautiful" movement. I see this engagement spilling out onto the beauty pageant stages in Cameroon in the 1960s.

Simidele Dosekun: On the question about whether the feminisms in our work – well, if we're even calling them feminisms or not – the question, is are they distinctly African? I would say, certainly in my own book, no. I make an argument for postfeminism as a transnational sensibility. I don't argue that it's in any way unique to Nigeria. But what I tried to do in the work, through what the women said in the interviews, was to show how postfeminism as a transnationally circulating, highly mediated, highly consumer sensibility articulates with local ideas and sensibilities on the ground, so maybe forming something that is distinctly Nigerian in the detail of it. But I think the broad logics certainly are not unique to the Nigerian or African contexts.

And then to speak to the question about feminism as a kind of foil, feminism as a certain standard against which, perhaps, we are judging or analysing all our data and our research participants. I know these lines get blurred for me in my

mind, and certainly in my speaking about my work; hopefully, the lines are clearer in the book itself. For me, the critique in the book is not about the women as individual subjects; it's really about the cultural repertoires and the discourse, the postfeminist discourse, and also the promises that postfeminism makes. That's where my critique is located. I argue that postfeminism is seductive – the idea that "you can have it all", "you can be it all", who would say no to that in a sense, right? It's seductive, it's glossy. So the critique is not "Why would a woman take up this kind of position?" The critique is more that the position that is on offer is quite hollow, ultimately. And also, I heard this from the women, in reference to their beauty practice, that it ends up being difficult but also painful to inhabit and to embody, to push oneself out into the world as a kind of confident woman who can "do it all", who can "have it all", when in fact there are very brute structures and logics militating against women that, of course, still remain, that one runs into.

Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué: On the question about African feminism, I want to combine it with another question I am also interested in: how the women in our studies themselves analyse the places of power they're seeking to access. Do they have critiques of the power structures that they must engage with, or are they simply trying to negotiate a pathway in?
This is a crucial question because it also brings into the fold the roles that traditional women's organisations play, particularly in my work. So, I don't want anybody in the audience leaving and thinking, "Okay, so you have these formal women's organisations connected to the male-dominated states, and that's it." But, on the other hand, we also have in play traditional women's organisations that have their own ideas about moral codes and the roles that women play in essentially navigating these moral codes or doling out punishments. And so a lot of the women's organisations that I was looking at, I saw that they were taking local ideas about women's political power in terms of ideas about what gender equality looks like to them, what feminist actions look like to them. But, still, they were also drawing on ideas about gender beyond these.

I would see these contradictions in terms of how women should behave. You have, for example, female journalists who would say, 'Okay, women, you shouldn't be chastising your husband in public, you should not be beating him, you need to control yourself." But then, if, say, the husband didn't provide money to feed his family, they would then draw from traditional ideas from local women's

organisations about how to work that out. So, you will have female journalists in the next column say, 'Okay, gather your friends, your neighbours, and you may all get together, chastise him, and shame him for essentially deviating from dominant ideas of gender norms for men." So they're drawing from different spaces and ideas about feminist actions and how these unfold. What I found really fascinating in my work, particularly when I was looking at the conclusion and addressing the political landscape of Cameroon today, is that traditional women's organisations come to the forefront when there are serious political grievances. The women's organisations that are connected to the state are, sort of, put to the side.

Srila Roy: Thank you all so much. I think the discussion only suggests how much this is the beginning of a discussion, it's generative at so many different levels. I mean, "Rethinking Gender", as we've called the webinar series, is a platform for rethinking the nation, for rethinking belonging, for rethinking race, class, affect, and ultimately, now, we've come to rethinking feminism. I'd like to say, as a final thing, that it also always strikes me, of course, in my own work on Indian feminism, how much our feminisms still operate as a foil to Western feminisms. So, the questions are always around what is distinctive about African feminism and, in my context, it would be South Asian feminism. I wonder if that puts us in this slightly awkward position where it maybe narrows the scope to really think about the multiplicity of our feminisms and the multiple political and conflicting legacies in the way, I think, Jacqueline's historical work really brings forth, and the multiple temporalities of the so-called neo-liberal globalised moment. I think I don't want to hear the question about the African or the Asian feminism anymore! I want to actually explode that a bit, to say, well, you know, we also have multiple feminisms and they're all kind of difficult and complicated, and women, queer folk, whoever, attach to these in very, very different and difficult ways. Thank you all again.

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