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Editorial: African women's struggles in a gender perspective

Bouilly, Emmanuelle., Rillon, Ophélie. and Cross, Hannah

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Special issue: African women's struggles// African women's struggles in a gender perspective

Editors : Emmanuelle Bouilly, Hannah Cross, Ophélie Rillon

Women's movements and associations flourished throughout Africa from the 1980s under major socioeconomic and political transformations such as the democratisation of political regimes, the liberalisation of economies, and the retreat of the state enforced by structural adjustment policies. At the same time, international aid and the development industry became more oriented to non-governmental and grassroots actors, while there was also an impetus from the international women's movement and from the UN International Decade for Women (1975-1985) to 'mainstream' women and their interests (Tripp 2009). In this context, a variety of women's organisations emerged – from professional and advocacy groups to savings and income-generating associations – which took up women's issues as well as more general concerns. To this end, some have lobbied for women's rights and the reform of customary practices and laws, access to land rights, reproductive rights, and legislatures; while others have immersed themselves in day-to-day struggles that aim to alleviate harsh living conditions. However, only a few claim to be feminist, as this term is often regarded a foreign construct and imperialist notion.

This recent trend should not hide the fact that African women's mobilisations are ancient. Historians have widely documented women's protest in precolonial and colonial periods, and have recorded female involvement in anti-colonial struggles, liberation wars and nationalist political movements (Allman et al. 2002; Geiger 1990; Schmidt 2002; Bouilly and Rillon 2016; Wipper 1989). Anthropologists and sociologists have also well described African women's activism, and analysed the gendered dimensions of collective action and protest. They have been particularly focused on motherhood and 'maternal politics' (Amadiume 1987; Wells 1998) and customary modes of protest and organizing (Ardener 1973; Cooper 2003; Snyder 2006; Tibbetts 1994). But these researches remain largely blind to social movement theories (among the few exceptions, are Arnfred, 2004; Kuumba 2001; Fallon, 2008; Steady, 2006) while a growing body of scholars has begun to reconceptualise the different paradigms of social movements theories gender blinded so far, and to explore the relationships between gender and collective action. Mainly based on Western case studies, these latter show that all movements – whether actors, or identities, framings, strategies, outcomes - are organised along gender lines in ways that have been unrecognised (Heinen and Trat 1997; Einwohner, 2000; Fillieule and Roux 2009; West and Blumberg, 1990; Staggenborg 1998). As Verta Taylor argues 'putting together the theoretical pieces of gender and social movement [allows] not only to demonstrate how theories of social movements expand existing approaches to gender change, but also to show how attention to gender processes enlarges our understanding of women's collective action' (1996 : 16). Unfortunately, this standpoint has not been followed by the recent burgeoning of social movements studies in the field of African studies whose analyses tend not to focus specifically on women and/or gender (ROAPE 2010; Banégas et al. 2010; Ellis et al. 2009; Dwyer and Zeilig 2012; Ballard and al. 2006). A similar observation can be made concerning the political economy approach. This latter has documented how African women have been marginalised within the economic and political fields, and how globalisation and neoliberal capitalism have affected African women's work and political organising (ROAPE 1983; 1993; Bujra 2000; Falquet 2008; Falquet and al. 2011; Turshen 2010). Some studies have underlined female daily forms of resistance or protests against class and gender oppression but did not converse with social movement theories. They do not always fully analyse these mobilisations *in the making* and the way that political

economy shapes these forms of resistance and is shaped by them dialectically in the process of struggle and contestation.

This special issue¹ aims to initiate a dialogue between these different literatures and theoretical tools, insufficiently connected so far. It offers an exploration of women's mobilisations throughout Africa by using gender as an analytical tool – considering that 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott 1986 : 1067). The collection of articles in this issue analyses women's mobilisations - whether feminist or not, and whether women-related or not - as a gendered social phenomenon. That is to say that they focus on one of the two categories of sexes - the women – but look at gender relations as a system. Thus, they explore how gender inequalities and gender relations shape female grievances and protest, and, in turn, how mobilisation affects (gender) power relations. In so doing, authors have embraced an inclusive approach to mobilisations, ranging from 'classical' social movements, to individual and collective forms of resistance and armed struggle. They take into account the warnings given by some researchers working either on women's mobilisations (Naples 1998; Taylor 1996; Walker 1982), or on resistance and collective action in Africa and the Global South (Bayat 1997; Bayart and al. 1992 ; Bennani-Chraïbi et Fillieule 2003) that popular dissent and struggles are not limited to the form 'social movement'. This is because its definitions, based on Western case studies, refer to the idea of an overt, conflictual, disruptive, collective and organised action targeting the state and aiming for social change (for a review of the conceptual debate over the definitions of a social movement, see Fillieule 2009; and for a debate over its [problematic] transfer in African contexts, see Mamdani and al. 1995; Siméant 2013; Bouilly 2016). This special issue, however, encompasses very different kinds of activism and mobilisation (poor and illiterate rural women, urban elites, local protesters, cosmopolitan and transnational actors, 'people in the margins' like common-law prisoners, or armed combatants), and very different political and economic contexts (peaceful countries, conflict and 'post-conflict' settings, 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' regimes). It brings together empirical case studies and more longitudinal comparative analyses using different materials (interviews, life stories, administrative and activist archives, grey literature, press), both in French and English-speaking countries, and in Northern and sub-Saharan Africa. This variety of case studies gives greater insights into the myriad profiles of individuals, and the ways in which they commit themselves, resist or protest against oppression, and how precisely they respond to multiple oppressions where gender, class, racial/ethnic, and other power relations interlock.

The contributions explore in depth the determinants, processes and outcomes of women's mobilisations *in the making* and *in situ*, as well as the social locations and militant trajectories of the actors involved. In so doing, they seek to avoid the pitfalls of oversimplification and essentialism often made as soon as it comes to African women, and more generally to 'Third World women' and 'subalterns', depicted only in binary forms either as supervictim, or superhero (Cornwall 2005; Mohanty 1984). In contrast, our approach offers a deeper understanding of singular, complex, challenging, and sometimes contradictory dynamics, and of the historical backgrounds of present phenomena.

The main themes that emerge comprise: the gendered political economy of protest; intersections of power within women's mobilisations; and relationships with 'external' actors: between the state, donors, and international support.

1. Gendering women's mobilisations, and the political economy of protest

In response to the protest movements born of the 2008 economic crisis and of the socio-economic demands at the roots of the 'Arab spring', many researchers have called for a

new awareness of capitalism in the analysis of social movements; and more broadly of the economic dimensions, which have been progressively forgotten as neoliberal governance separates the economic from the political sphere (Ancelovici and al. ; Catusse 2013 ; Della Porta 2015 ; Hetland and Goodwin, 2003). In this vein, David Seddon and Leo Zeilig (2003) have reasserted the salience of class analysis in popular protest on the African continent, in line with what they call a ‘third wave’ of protest to confront global capitalist re-structuring since the 1990s.

Following these recommendations, and the results from gender and social movements studies, this issue claims a gendered analysis of economic and political contexts. As Olivier Fillieule underlines:

since social institutions are gendered, it is evident that the economy, the labour market and the political system generate specific frustrations and opportunities for mobilisations according to the gender positions occupied. As well, since economic and political changes in society all have the likelihood of being differentiated from a gender point of view, it must be expected, according to these occupied positions, that there are objective as well as subjective variations in the available resources for action but also in the opportunities, costs and risks of mobilising protest (Fillieule 2009 : 32).

In this perspective, the contributions gathered in this issue consider that local/national and global economic contexts are not neutral from the gender perspective, and that they constitute obstacles as much as opportunities and targets of protest for African women - even if the studied actors do not appeal to an anticapitalist and antiglobalisation rhetoric, and their mobilisations are established outside the ‘traditional’ venues of struggle like the workplace. Thus, these contributions analyse African women’s struggles in their relationship to the wider context of political, economic and social change on the continent, and seek to determine how economic and political forces shape women’s protest, including the resources, activities, organisation and modes of action, the objectives and claims, the tactics, the discourses, framings, and identity, and the outcomes of women’s mobilisations. Contributors aim to understand the effects of inequalities on movement processes, and the gendered nature of economic and political opportunities. While they consider the influence of economic structural factors on women’s collective action, they do not favour the ‘relative deprivation’ argument developed by Ted Gurr (1970), which is highly criticised for its mechanistic explanation of rebellion. On the contrary, papers analyse in-depth why and how African women living under similar conditions tend to protest or not, exploring the way in which the actors perceive and evaluate concretely the socioeconomic and political context in which they live – at once singular and global, always changing – and the way they represent their multiple experiences of domination. To achieve that, the authors put the emphasis on ‘bottom-up’ and micro-level analyses.

For example, in the suburbs of Dakar, Emmanuelle Bouilly argues that Senegalese women created an association to raise awareness of the risks of boat migration to Europe, and to give moral and economic support to mothers of drowned and disappeared migrants because of gendered strategic needs. Women appear to be more affected by the social and economic consequences of male migration due to the sexual division of labour in the household and in the migration process, within a local context characterised by deep socioeconomic change.

Under the intensification of large-scale land acquisitions in Morocco, Yasmine Berriane underlines how the economic environment spurs rural women to struggle for securing their rights to the collectively-owned land of which they have been deprived. Similarly, in Burundi, women’s coalitions fighting for reform in land inheritance argue for the importance of land in the rural economy, and in doing so, for women’s empowerment (Saiget).

In turn, Temitope Oriola shows how women have committed themselves in Nigeria's oil insurgency to fight against the marginalisation of the rich Delta region, and to claim their role in national development as well as the well-being of their children. He finds that structural violence and social deprivation, lead women to take up 'men's actions' including gun-running, spying, armed combat and the commanding of forces, mediation in kidnapping, and spiritual guidance. Aili Mary Tripp challenges the assumptions that low GDP or oil rent economies have supposed inhibitory effects on women's political representation, showing instead the key role of women's rights coalitions in implementing quotas and increasing female representation in parliaments in Algeria and Mauritania. Thus, power and gendered inequalities such as segregation of the labour market, the unequal access to parliaments or land, or the sexual division of labour can spur some women to protest and participate in movements. The structurally differentiated positions of women and men in the economy and society can also explain the gender-skewed composition of social movements, and the fact that women move themselves more towards women's issues, and specific modes of protest (Filippi) or 'organisational repertoires' (Clemens 1993) such as self-help groups, savings groups, grassroots associations, or organisations only run by women (Berriane; Bouilly). This does not mean, however, that they do not use other modes of protest invested by men, such as the use of violence or actions in the realm of law (Filippi, Oriola, and Berriane, Saiget, Tripp).

Beside the analysis of the influence of economic factors in processes of individual commitment and collective action, the papers show equally how useless it is to separate material demands, or movements for subsistence, from 'political' demands, as James Scott (1990) and Edward Thompson (1991) have also highlighted. When South African women protested for better living conditions in Pollsmoor prison, they also contested the racial, class, and gendered system of discrimination and oppression under apartheid. Natacha Filippi shows how, from the 1980s, the growing number of political prisoners in turn politicised female prisoners. It changed their modes of protest, and moved common-law prisoners to claim their civil and political rights. In a similar way, when Senegalese women fight against 'illegal' boat migration, they also speak out against polygamy and their spouses' failure to provide familial expenditures (Bouilly). Rural and urban community-based protest organisations which are not framed explicitly as 'anti-capitalistic', and claim for material assistance, are 'political' too, and can advocate for broader concerns than just materialistic ones. Women's movements for access to land in Morocco and Burundi, for example, deploy notions of social justice or gender discrimination, and use a human rights rhetoric (Berriane, Saiget). At another level, Amanda Gouws shows that the women's movement against gender-based violence also conveys a harsh criticism against Jacob Zuma's legitimacy and the ANC's politics. Conversely, what is considered as 'political' in women's rights movements turns out to reveal strong economic concerns.

More broadly, this Special Issue analyses how gender affects women's activism. Gender attributions shape specific identities, which can spur or constrain women's mobilisation. For instance, motherhood, and the social role of 'caregiver', can legitimise women's participation in armed movements, such as in the oil insurgency in Nigeria (Oriola) as well as grassroots mobilisation against male migration in Senegal (Bouilly). According to these cases, feminine or maternal identity can contribute to reinforcing normative gendered roles and reproduce female oppression, or open the route to forms of individual emancipation and collective victories. In the Nigerian case, Temitope Oriola shows the resilience of gender discrimination. He notes the persistence of the sexual division of labour as some insurgents were only engaged in domestic duties. The few who acted 'like a man', that is to say who committed themselves in the armed struggle, have paid the price of their transgression from gender assignments after the war. They have been particularly stigmatised as 'bad women' and socioeconomically and politically marginalised at the moment of demobilisation. Rank

and file female insurgents do not benefit from their participation in armed combat, and women's emancipation was not the outcome. In another case, Yasmine Berriane brings to light the influence of patriarchal family structures and their ambiguous effects on the mobilisation of Soulaliate: these women rely on patrilineal descent and the notability of their father to claim their rights to land even though the patriarchal system excludes them from inheritance. On the contrary, Amanda Gouws shows that in South Africa the nationalist discourse based on motherhood has prevented the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) from committing itself in a feminist campaign against gender based violence. Gender norms are therefore a resource as well as a constraint for the activists depending on the context and society, and on the configuration of actors; and this needs to be specified and studied in depth.

Finally, we note that men and women often verbalise and justify differently their motivations for engagement and their activist experience. Hence the importance of interrogating the ways in which, and the circumstances under which, they articulate their experiences of engagement. The accounts in this issue of the *Review* illustrate the importance of seeing how men and women are mobilised according to the prescriptions of gender relations. In the Nigerian case, the women questioned by Temitope Oriola explain their entry into armed struggle with the concern that they are responsible for the well-being and future of their children, thereby replaying the dynamics of family and the provision of assistance. They tend to say they joined the struggle with a male figure as an intermediary, whereas the male combatants evoke political ('fight for freedom') and personal causes ('need for personal fulfilment'). For their part, the fathers of Senegalese migrants claim that the main reasons for the stronger mobilisation of women in the struggle are 'feminine emotionalism' and their maternal role as caregiver (Bouilly).

2. Intersections of power within women's mobilisations

If this issue of *the Review* adopts a gendered approach to social mobilisations, its contributors are largely attentive to the complex interlocking systems of oppression, what Kimberle Crenshaw first called 'intersectionality' (1989). Intersectionality has been a primary framework for thinking about multiple identities and social locations, and for grasping the interconnectedness of various systems of oppression in women's lives. It has thus far been neglected in feminist theory dominated by white and elite women. African intellectuals have voiced similar criticisms. Two of the best known, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) and Ifi Amadiume (1987) reject the term 'gender' because according to them it is based on a specific Western form of social organisation – the nuclear family system – which does not fit African realities. Oyěwùmí adds that female oppression is not universal, and that other power relations such as seniority are most relevant in African societies. Other historians have emphasised the importance of age and social relations of seniority, showing their articulation with economic positions in the analysis of gender relations in Africa (Mandala 1990; McKittrick 2002 ; Miescher 2005).

The notion of 'intersectionality' quickly became widespread, mainstream, and rather unquestioned, at least until recently when it has increasingly been criticised (Collins and Chepp 2013). Beyond the resulting theoretical debates concerning the definition of the concept of intersectionality and the possibility of its transfer from the US context, this special issue is indebted to the contributions to feminist theory made by black feminism and women from the Global South, which invite us to sharpen our understanding of inequalities and their intersections. Above all, intersectionality proposes a model for reading inequalities and characteristics of domination, meaning both the dominated and dominant. The interest of this literature is that it invites us to extricate ourselves from a universal, unidimensional and

ahistorical analysis of domination, and to consider the imbrication of systems of domination particular to the researched actors and configurations. Natacha Filippi provides a fine example of this when she examines women prisoners' protests during the second half of the apartheid regime. She analyses the power relations based on racial, gender and class categories and the forms of repression, resistance and collaboration that emerged. This included parallel mobilisations from the South African Prisoners' Organisation for Human Rights (SAPOHR), established at Moderbee Prison, and the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) in Pollsmoor, which gained support from some prisoners as it organised actions denouncing the racial hierarchy and economic inequalities.

A number of other articles show that African women are far from sharing common interests and goals, and do not constitute a homogeneous category. Contrary to the assertions of some works, there is in essence no such thing as a singular 'female solidarity' – one of the myths of feminism according to Andrea Cornwall (2007). This special issue shows that women's organisations experience internal divisions emerging out of women's different social positions. For example, Emmanuelle Bouilly explains that mothers and spouses of migrants do not share the same position in the household and in Senegalese society. This is why young spouses did not commit themselves to the mobilisation against boat migration. Social hierarchies (socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic group or age) and unequal resources (formal education, fluency in foreign languages, access to the internet, paid job, law or developmental expertise etc.) impinge on women's activism, and shape discourses and forms of protest. They constrain the conditions under which coalitions are possible and how the leadership is delegated as well as determining the existence of a division of labour between women. Issues of leadership are evident and non-mixed movements do not escape the monopolisation of posts of responsibility by activists accessing highly valued social resources (education, international connections and masculine political organisations). This brings us to the thorny issue of the material basis of collective action. Yasmine Berriane examines the making of a coalition across social divides, showing the inequalities and power relations that emerge in the Soulaliyate movement in Morocco. Portrayed as a grassroots mobilisation of rural and illiterate women, this movement has been possible thanks to the skills and resources of the Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (ADFM), a female organisation led by an urban and educated elite. This alliance resulted in a hybrid framing of the land rights issue balanced between universal and particularistic (and patriarchal) conceptions of women's rights. Tensions have emerged gradually during the mobilisation, dividing women with different priorities for the short- and long-term. The divide between rural and urban, poor and middle or upper-class, illiterate and educated activists is also underlined in the Burundian case studied by Marie Saiget where the elite do not succeed in crossing the class divide and building bridges with the rural women who are under-represented in the movement. On the other hand, Aili Mary Tripp shows that in certain circumstances (post-war settings, threat of Islamism, and an international agenda), activists can cross divisions and unite to press for women's rights legislation.

These examples show how gender must be combined with other categories to grasp the power relations within female and mixed movements. It is thus necessary to dismantle any binary or fixed vision of relations of domination which are themselves reworked *within* and *through* collective action. In adopting a dynamic and historical approach to power relations, these contributions invite us to envisage the reconfiguration of social hierarchies. They also highlight issues of representativeness by leaders of collective action. They offer a nuanced portrait of power relations between activists at the heart of coalitions. First, they underline the asymmetry of resources between mobilised women, resulting in the reproduction of inequalities and relations of domination in favour of an elite, and equally they show the invisibilisation of certain causes, opinions and discourses of the women least privileged by

capital. Second, they show that the room for manoeuvre is created in action and in studying carefully the manner in which the most dominated can bypass and resist the asymmetry of resources. Yasmine Berriane's study of the Soulaliyate movement reveals that the poorest actors are not totally deprived of resources (the image of 'authenticity' valorised by international donors) and that they have acquired cognitive and social resources in the course of action (self-confidence, multiplication of contacts). Thus, mobilisations have to be regarded as 'the expression of the contradictions and hierarchies of the society in which they operate, whose debates and conflicts express inequalities of resources' (Larmer 2010 : 252), characterised by the intersections of power specific to any society but not entirely limited by them.

3. Relationships to 'external' actors: the state, donors, and international support.

Finally, the question of power relations and inequalities merits consideration of external actors, principally the state, political parties, and international actors (institutional and non-governmental) that are targeted by women's movements as a source of protest or of support and representation. This special issue exemplifies the complex relationship between these movements, the international community, and the political field in contemporary Africa.

Aili Mary Tripp and Joy Constance Kwesiga (2002) had previously identified the expansion of female associational life throughout the continent as a 'new generation of women's mobilisation', seen as more autonomous as well as more heterogeneous than previous women's organisations tied to single national parties after independence. The question of relations between the state and women's movements is long-debated (Banaszak and al. 2003 ; Beckwith 2007), and notably on the African continent through the lens of clientelism, co-optation and repression (Tripp 2001). The contributions here nourish this debate, and offer a mixed picture of these interactions. Aili Mary Tripp underlines, for example, that the vote on the parity law in Senegal owes much to President Wade's investment and internal political calculations. Marie Saiget analyses the fluctuating position of both heads of state and male and female politicians on the question of land reform in Burundi. During the post-war period, women activists built alliances with female politicians from the main political parties that enabled them to lobby the legal system and put land reform on the parliamentary agenda, until the head of state's volte-face in 2011. The land issue was side-stepped by the Burundi government using a well-worn strategy that attributes the desire for change solely to the demands of an urban female elite, also arguing that this reform would rekindle ethnic conflicts. In the South African case, Amanda Gouws, in examining the strategies of the Shukumisa Campaign and the ANCWL against gender-based violence, shows that autonomous feminist movements have been muted by a dominant ANC. Too closely associated with ruling nationalist bodies, the ANCWL did not change policy-making and it achieved little in ameliorating the problem of gender-based violence. As Shireen Hassim has argued elsewhere (2006), the institutionalisation of 'equality feminism' is manipulated by patriarchal governments to marginalise efforts at genuine change.

This picture is further complicated by the integration of mobilised actors and African states in the global order. In some cases, the framing of issues is credited to international norms and agendas. Like other social movements, international standards can serve to support protest (Risse-Kappen et al. 1999), or they may turn against the protestors. Marie Saiget convincingly shows the unpredictable trajectories followed by women's movements alongside their relationships to donors or international supporters. Works on the transnationalisation of collective action (Della Porta Tarrow 2005 ; Tarrow 2001 ; Siméant 2010) have already underlined the contrasting effects of international access, including for African activists

(Pommerolle and Siméant 2010 ; Siméant 2013). A focus on NGOs often concludes on the NGOisation of social movements (Hearn 1998 ; Jad 2004) – understood as a depoliticisation – with the development of very moderate practices, using the register of expertise and advocacy, isolated from the practice of protest. However, notwithstanding the asymmetry of relations and resources, these processes are not homogenous. Appealing to law and to the register of human rights is a means of legitimating women’s mobilisations for land reform, particularly when those in power – including those with authoritarian tendencies – subscribe themselves – at least officially – to the watchwords and policy requirements of the liberal order of international donors such as human rights, ‘participation’, or ‘good governance’ (Berriane ; Saiget). Thus, some African women take advantage of the international concern for gender-related issues to challenge oppressive national practices and reshape policy-making. They also try to reshape external agendas in their own terms and interests, or to carve out enviable professional or political positions. Marie Saiget similarly examines the complex interactions of legal, political and civil institutions that shape land law in Burundi. She studies how these interactions politicise, de-politicise and re-politicise women’s collective action on land inheritance. She argues that international actors are a central factor of (de-)politicisation, acting as a third party between women’s associations and the state. After using the global human rights discourse, international actors moved towards a less polemical ‘gender and development’ and ‘rural women’s empowerment’ framing of the issue of land. This neutralises the political, social and economic dimensions of women’s land inheritance, but at the same time intensifies cleavages among the different actors involved, and in this sense re-politicises the issue. Thus, women’s movements appear profoundly hybridised, suffering from as much as instrumentalising liberal international concepts, financing, the arena of speaking, and methods of protest formulated elsewhere.

Ultimately, the articles in this issue, by engaging in the detailed description and analysis of various mobilisations of African women, encourage the restitution of the complex interplay of inequalities, and power relations, that shape their movements in specific historical, social and local contexts. They provide an equivocal portrait of women’s autonomy and agency in local and global contexts of inequalities that call for further comparative researches that deepen our understanding of regional and historical similarities or differences (language, religion, colonial experience, political regimes etc.) of African women’s mobilisations on the continent, and their impacts on the political economy of protest.

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