

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender-based violence in West Africa: how women's and feminist movements are driving norm change



Dr Titilope F. Ajayi

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About the author

Dr. Titilope F Ajayi is a pracademic and independent research and knowledge consultant specialising in gender/women, conflict, peace and security, civil society and social movements.

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Introduction

Changing harmful gender norms and power relations is one of the most effective ways to tackle gender-based violence (GBV) (World Bank, 2019). Yet the nexus between GBV and harmful gender norms is rarely foregrounded in existing knowledge or by feminist and women's anti-GBV activists and movements (Jiménez Thomas Rodríguez et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2020; Horn, 2013; Hassim, 2005; Tamale, 1999). Using critical reviews of evidence and semi-structured field interviews, this report on women's and feminist movements and norm change explores the interplay between gender norms and GBV in Senegal and Sierra Leone. It examines how their anti-GBV activism has affected harmful gender norms and the factors that have either enabled or prevented this impact.

The interplay between gender norms and GBV

Gender norms

Both countries are deeply patriarchal and impose widespread restrictions on women and girls. Gender norms prescribe women's domestic duties, expectations of acceptable behaviour and adherence to cultural rites that weigh heavily on women, in particular. Gender norms are enforced through multiple layers of social control, such as reprimand and social exclusion. These controls discourage women from violating gender norms and punish those that do. Divorced women, for example, are often ostracised and may suffer neglect and emotional violence.

Tools of social control

Religious beliefs and practices are tools of control that perpetuate the sanctity of women's subordination, with dire consequences for those who disobey. GBV is also used to police the appearance of women and girls in keeping with gender norms, with penalties for those who are seen as wearing 'provocative' clothing or dressing 'indecently'. Cultures of silence prevent survivors of GBV from speaking out, particularly about violence in the home, while pressure to conform with cultural practices such as female genital cutting (FGC) and bride price¹ shapes women's social power in communities.

1 Bride price is money, property, or wealth 'paid' to the parents of a woman for the right to marry their daughter.

The impact of women's and feminist activism on the gender norms that enable GBV

Norm change has been seen in three areas, in particular. First, in attitudinal shifts among political actors and citizens. Second, in the spaces that have been opened by activism for debate about once taboo subjects, such as FGC. And third, in tangible outcomes, including progressive laws and policies. Feminist anti-GBV activism has been found to have had both positive and negative impacts on these three areas that must be viewed through the lens of progressive change within the deeply patriarchal contexts of both countries.

Progressive legal and policy change

Through consistent advocacy against everyday violence and intensified activism against extreme violence, women's and feminist movements in both countries have contributed to the creation and revision of legal and policy frameworks on GBV. They have helped to push for legal reform to enhance gender equality and women's political representation (including through the uptake of global norms) that could lower women's vulnerability to GBV. These impacts have been made possible by significant shifts in national cultural and policy spaces, as reflected in a growing openness to change both norms and narratives by actors who were once very anti-feminist and anti-gender.

Broader attitudinal and behavioural change

By combining awareness raising, civic disobedience and norm questioning in public and private spaces, feminist activism has helped to drive gradual and normative shifts in state, societal and personal attitudes and behaviours towards the gender norms that enable GBV and towards women's political leadership. These changes can be seen, for example, in relation to engrained cultural practices such as FGC, which is no longer a taboo subject and is being practised less (and discouraged). In addition, cultures of silence are eroding as survivors and their families become more willing to speak out about – and report – GBV.

Levels of gender-based violence

There are variations in the quality and reliability of and access to GBV data, and participants in this research had differing opinions about trends in GBV in recent years and whether and how it has been affected by feminist activism. Both rising and declining levels of GBV could be the outcome of effective activism that has led to either higher reporting or fewer incidence, or of ineffective activism that is reflected in higher incidence or lower reporting rates.

Anti-gender backlash

Activists in Senegal and Sierra Leone face multi-layered resistance and backlash for countering accepted gender norms and threatening established social structures. Feminists, in particular, are viewed as socially deviant and are regularly denounced and delegitimised. This backlash is compounded by a growing anti-gender movement that dehumanises women and seeks to undo progress on women's rights. In Senegal, for example, this can be seen in misogynistic social media posts and a growing trend among young men for misogynistic music and girlfriend beating. Female journalists have also been harassed online and have faced divorce and GBV for supporting anti-GBV activism.

Silencing of victims of gender-based violence

Activists face the dilemma of the need for stiffer penalties for certain types of GBV and the unintended impact this might have on survivors who seek justice. This may include the greater incentive to agree to out-of-court settlements and a heightened risk that perpetrators may kill survivors to avoid accountability.

Downplaying 'everyday' forms of gender-based violence

Although sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) is a dominant form of GBV (and one that causes high moral outrage), the strong focus on this form of GBV among activists has inadvertently diverted attention away from other forms of 'everyday violence', such as domestic, workplace and online violence. The focus on GBV against children has helped to galvanise major changes in law and policy, but has made violence against women less visible.

Factors that contribute to changes in norms that enable GBV

Strong (women's and) feminist movements

The centrality of women's and feminist movements in driving changes in gender norms is enabled by a dedicated and intergenerational core of activists, shared networks and relationships of trust and common values. Feminist activists also recognise and have invested in movement building by: training young feminist leaders, including men, who are growing in number; using new tools like social media; and integrating the need to tackle the broader patriarchal violence that enables GBV into their activism.

High-level political support

Senegal's former President, Macky Sall, and his wife were relatively quiet about GBV. In contrast, the President of Sierra Leone's declaration of a state of emergency (Government of Sierra Leone, 2019) and his wife's campaign to address GBV against girls are seen as decisive and influential. Both cases reinforce the importance of executive leadership for countering GBV and its underlying norms.

Male engagement

The logic of engaging men as anti-GBV allies is supported by state and non-state actors but this engagement is being implemented in gender conservative ways that do not lead men to question GBV-enabling social norms and power structures, or male privilege in deeply patriarchal societies. This is reflected in disparities between some men's public and private identities and practices regarding GBV and the status of women.

Challenges and barriers to norm change on GBV

Tensions between global and traditional norms

Considerable resistance to GBV-enabling norm change is based on a perception of the imposition of global norms as a threat to cultural authenticity. Pathways to change have involved negotiating this tension in ways that reduce harm while preserving cultural benefits and protecting women's agency and power.

Unseen linkages between cultural practices and GBV

Cultural practices, such as bride price, are known to enable GBV, yet they are overlooked by activists, ostensibly because of their cultural significance. This indicates a conflict between bride price as a cultural marker of identity for married women that simultaneously exposes them to GBV because of the gender norms that underpin its practice.

Intergenerational dynamics in feminist movements

Intergenerational tensions within and between the women's and feminist movements in both countries are fuelled by differences in ideology, approach and worldviews on feminism.

Resourcing feminist activism

Many activists who participated in this research cited insufficient and dwindling resources as a challenge to anti-GBV work, while some noted the pressing need for more feminist resourcing that could enable flexible responses to the threats to women's safety. There were also calls for more flexible, non-traditional structures within non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Conclusion

Feminist activism in the patriarchal landscapes of Senegal and Sierra Leone has made inroads into GBV-enabling gender norms and attitudes by enhancing gender norm awareness, changing attitudes and behaviours around GBV, and by building feminist movements. However, it has encountered unintentional and negative resistance, such as anti-gender and anti-feminist backlash, that strengthen the case for continued anti-GBV activism. Other actors in the anti-GBV ecosystems in both countries could support feminist movements with:

- reliable quantitative data and focused sociological research to provide deeper and more nuanced insights into the dynamics of GBV that transcend the limited anecdotal evidence offered by selected NGO or donor project reports
- flexible and core funding that adapts to movements' needs, based on holistic views of GBV-enabling factors, with harmful norm change positioned as a key goal
- the facilitation of safe spaces for lessons learned and sharing of good practices from other countries and contexts to deepen ongoing efforts to bridge generational and ideological gaps and support collaboration
- the strengthening of the capacities of both states to follow through on their GBV commitments in partnership with feminist activists and movements – including through increased and sustained women's political leadership, the creation and efficient management of implementing structures, and the continued sensitisation of all state actors across different regimes.

References

For full references, [see main report](#).

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

ALIGN Programme

ODI

203 Blackfriars Road

London SE1 8NJ

United Kingdom

Email: align@odi.org.uk

Web: www.alignplatform.org

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