

## Women's resistance

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Climate-related damages are getting worse:  
burnt houses in Los Angeles in January, p. 24.



Photo: picture alliance / abaca / Balkis Press / ABACA



HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa is currently the de facto political ruler in Syria, p. 5.

“European democracy is normally not under attack from North America, but it is happening now.”

Hans Dembowski, p. 22

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Photo: picture alliance / Anadolu / Tayfun Coskun

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The development of women's rights is a barometer for free societies. Governments that restrict women's rights also tend to suppress other human and civil rights too. With autocracies on the rise worldwide, a strong women's movement is all the more important. Most struggles take place quietly and require a lot of patience. But women are not silent anywhere, not even in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have literally silenced their voices. Women are a driving force for more justice, democracy and freedom.

Cover: mural from the series "Bird with no nation" by graffiti artist Shamsia Hassani from Afghanistan. [shamsiahassani.net](http://shamsiahassani.net)

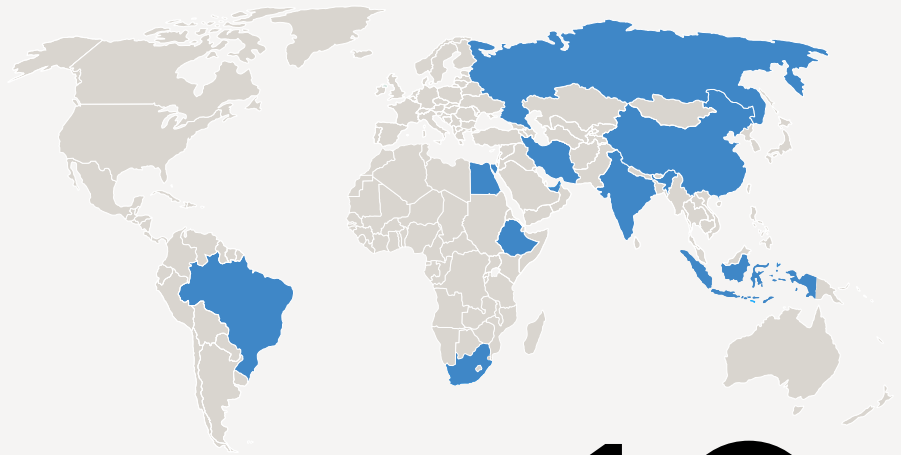


Photo: Shamsia Hassani

The good news

# 81%

A study by the International Renewable Energy Agency showed that 81 % of renewable energy additions in 2023 were cheaper than fossil alternatives.



Since the beginning of January, Indonesia also belongs to this group, which sees itself as the voice of the so-called global south – and as a counterweight to the western-oriented G7. The other members are Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates.

We had a closer look at BRICS+ last June.

# 10

**BRICS+ has 10 member states now**

## International conferences in 2025

**International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Global Conference,**  
Nairobi, 19-21 February

**Finance In Common Summit,**  
Cape Town, 26-28 February

**World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS),**  
New Delhi, 5-7 March

**Sustainable Energy for All Global Forum,**  
Bridgetown, 12-13 March

**Global Disability Summit,**  
Berlin, 2-3 April

**Global Climate Action Summit,**  
San Francisco, 20-22 April

**World Bank Land Conference,**  
Washington, 5-8 May

**World Circular Economy Forum,**  
São Paulo, 13-16 May

**Infra4Dev Conference,**  
Guangzhou, 15-16 May

**Hamburg Sustainability Conference,**  
Hamburg, 2-3 June

**UN Oceans Conference,**  
Nice, 9-13 June

**Global Sustainable Development Congress,**  
Istanbul, 30 June - 3 July

**4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Financing for Development,**  
Seville, 30 June - 3 July

**13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD),**  
Rome, 10-11 September

**UNGA Climate Week,**  
New York, 21-28 September

**IUCN World Conservation Congress,**  
Abu Dhabi, 9-15 October

**World Health Summit,**  
Berlin, 12-14 October

**World Congress on Agroforestry,**  
Kigali, 20-24 October

**Second World Summit for Social Development,**  
Doha, 4-6 November

**United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30),**  
Belém, 10-21 November

## ISLAMIST IDEOLOGIES

# Fundamentally different fundamentalists

*As the long civil war in Syria has shown, Islamist groups do not easily form any kind of united front. That was one reason the Assad regime could last for decades. People in western countries often do not understand how complex the phenomenon we call Islamism actually is. Here is a short primer on the three principal currents of Islamist ideologies and their inner divisions.*

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BY HANS DEMBOWSKI

In early December, Syrian rebels took Damascus, forcing the brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad to flee to Moscow. It is too early to tell whether this was the beginning of the end of the country's long civil war. Violence seems to keep flaring up between Kurdish militias and pro-Turkish forces.

At this point, Ahmed al-Sharaa – also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani – seems to be the most powerful man in the country. He has been appointed interim president and leads the Sunni militia Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is the strongest rebel group. It has roots in Al-Qaida and ISIS, but later split from their version of global jihadist terrorism. Al-Sharaa now endorses a kind of Syrian nationalism that appears to tolerate the countries' diversity of communities, including non-Muslim religious faiths. Over the years, HTS has cautiously built ties to Turkey, though cooperation was difficult, at least initially. What kind of political system will now emerge in Syria is an open question. Whether HTS embraces democracy is not clear.

The country's long years of strife, however, show just how complex Islamist ideologies are. There actually are three different ideological traditions that emerged in different countries and served different political interests. The different traditions are often more likely to fight one another than to cooperate. All three branches of Islamism are relevant in Syria.

The three different approaches to Islam-based fundamentalism are:

- The Muslim Brotherhood, which was launched in the 1920s in Egypt in response to British imperialism,
- Wahhabi puritanism, which is related to the Royal House of Saud and other Gulf monarchies, and
- Shia fundamentalism, which is linked to Iran's theocratic regime.

None of them are internally fully coherent or politically consistent over time. In this sense, they are not fundamentalist in a monolithic sense. Like all political ideologies, they adapt to changing circumstances in a variety of ways.

## MUSLIM BROTHERS

The Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the most modern of the three. In some ways, it resembles the Hindu supremacist RSS in India. Both were initially based on educated middle-class people who were appalled by the corruption of the colonial power. The idea was that only the purity of religion could ensure integrity. Doctors, pharmacists, lawyers and other privileged colonial subjects yearned to see the unjust rule of foreigners replaced with a more just order run by the faithful, though not necessarily faith leaders.

A big difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and India's Hindu supremacists was that the latter had a narrow-minded identity agenda from the start. To some extent, they were more interested in oppressing the subcontinent's Muslim minority than in ending colonial



**It is still too early to tell whether he will prove sectarian or pluralist: HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa speaking in the Umayyad Mosque on 8 December.**

rule. On the other hand, leaders of India's Muslim community insisted that their people would need a separate state after independence so they would not be at the mercy of Hindus. Their ideology, however, was not Islamist. They claimed to represent the Indian subcontinent's Muslims, but they were not driven by notions of returning to original Koranic values.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had a political agenda, but it also had a welfare agenda. It was involved in charitable action and educational efforts. To a considerable extent, these programmes served to win the trust of grassroots communities. At the same time, the Muslim Brothers mostly worked in a clandestine manner. Fearing repression, they organised in secret networks.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was copied in other Arab countries on the Eastern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean as well as in Turkey. Typically, these groups remained repressed opposition forces. After independence, the new leaders of Arab countries promoted a secular understanding of nationalism, and so did Turkey's leaders after the collapse of the Ottoman empire. In those leaders' eyes, religion was an outdated obstacle to modernisation. The regimes were authoritarian, and Muslim Brother activists often ended up behind bars.

Their clandestine networks survived, however, and so did their ideology. Today, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party AKP are rooted in the Muslim Brother tradition. Erdoğan's attitudes have become increasingly authoritarian in the past decade, but he was once a modernising reformer. One might say that he dismantled Turkey's old deep state before establishing a new deep state. Disappointment in the EU accession process was certainly one reason he backed off from western policymakers.

Another Muslim Brother was Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's elected president for a brief period after the Arab Spring. He was toppled by the military, and his political movement is once again oppressed.

Tunisia's Rached al-Ghannouchi also belongs to this tradition. Like Morsi, he became quite influential in his country after the Arab Spring, but under the increasingly authoritarian rule of President Kais Saied, he was sentenced to a prison term for corruption in early 2024. His Ennahda Party, however, had evolved to a point where it aspired to a role of Muslim Democrats akin to Christian Democrats in Germany, formally endorsing multi-party democracy.

Such rhetoric probably seems strange to many Europeans because they think that democracy and Islam cannot be reconciled. Al-Ghannouchi's stance is much more plausible than they realise. Indeed, Ennahda's version of the Muslim Brotherhood did resemble European Christian Democrats in important ways.

After World War II, the Christian Democrats were based on upper middle-class leaders who endorsed Catholic values in view of the Nazi dictatorship and the mayhem of the war. While Catholic church doctrine and hierarchy remain undemocratic even today, the political parties it inspired became pillars of democracy not only in Germany, but in several West European countries.

## “Many Muslim Brothers organisations suffered more violence than they perpetrated.”

On the other hand, the tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood does not necessarily accept a multi-party system. It can turn quite authoritarian. The prime example is Hamas in Palestine which runs a terrorist militia. Its militancy, however, is not typical of Muslim Brothers in general. While there is a long history of various governments calling the Muslim Brothers terrorists, many of the organisations suffered more violence than they perpetrated. In Syria, Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar and previous dictator, brutally suppressed Muslim Brother activity. His forces killed at least 10,000 people in a three-week massacre in Hama in February 1982. According to some estimates, there were even 40,000 dead. Today, Syrian militias that are directly supported by Turkey basically belong in this ideological camp.

## WAHHABISM

The history of Wahhabism is entirely different. This puritanical theology was adopted by monarchical clan leaders on the Arab peninsula. They wanted to establish kingdoms and longed for international respect, but their desert region and its people were considered to be backward. Responding to the condescension, not only of the west, but of Arab metropolitan centres like Cairo, Damascus or Tunis, the Royal House of Saud took to praising its role as a guardian of the holy city of Mecca. It promoted a particularly rigid version of Islam.

Oil exports, of course, helped the Gulf monarchies to increase their international relevance. They gained considerable financial clout and spent some of that money on Wahhabi missionaries. These missionaries spread their puritanical ideas in other predominantly Muslim countries. Thanks to their ability to mobilise funding for new mosques and Koran schools, they became quite influential in many places, in sub-Saharan Africa as well as South and South-East Asia. Traditional Sufism, which had focused on spirituality and was generally quite tolerant, therefore came under increasing pressure.

In spite of their alliance with the USA and western nations, the absolutist Gulf monarchies were never interested in democracy, and they remain quite despotic. Nonetheless, they lost control of the most radical versions of Wahhabi ideology, which spawned the terrorist organisations Al-Qaida and ISIS.

Afghanistan's Taliban, moreover, have also thrived on Wahhabi support. They are perhaps the best example of how destructive this world view can become. After the

**Roots in the Muslim Brotherhood: Mohamed Morsi of Egypt at a public event with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey in 2012.**



Photo: picture alliance / dpa / Egyptian Presidency / Handout



Photo: picture alliance / Bildagentur-online / U.I.G.

**Wahhabi-inspired militant:  
Osama bin Laden.**

Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, Saudi-backed missionaries became active in refugee camps in Pakistan. The Taliban emerged from those camps and were actually encouraged by US agencies to return home and fight the Soviet troops. After long years of bloodshed, they took control of the country in the late 1990s and then offered Al-Qaida a safe haven. The terror attacks of 11 September 2001 made evident how badly US support for Islamist rebels in the 1980s had gone wrong.

It is actually not difficult to tell Wahhabi-inspired Islamists' from the Muslim Brothers' variety. The latter's leaders typically dress like western policymakers, the former wear traditional clothing. Alliances between them are rare. Muslim Brothers generally do not accept Saudi claims to faith leadership. They also have no systematic interest in monarchy.

The Saudis therefore resent the Muslim Brothers. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has indeed been relying on Saudi and Wahhabi support since staging a military coup against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. In the course of the coup, several hundred Morsi supporters were killed in the brutal Rabaa massacre. Turkish President Erdoğan regularly refers to it, in a clear display of identifying with Morsi's tradition of Islamism. Among NATO leaders, Erdoğan is probably the one who most vehemently resents Saudi Arabia.

In Syria, Wahhabi-inspired jihadism was strongest when ISIS controlled a large part of the country about a decade ago. ISIS was degraded with international support in the civil war, but not crushed entirely. The now dominant HTS belonged in this camp but has disowned its former role models. That shows that even very radical ideologies do not necessarily persist unchanged over time.



**Shia revolutionary: Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran in 1979.**

## SHIA THEOCRACY

Shia fundamentalism became an important force in global affairs in 1979 when a public uprising ended the rule of the Shah in Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in Paris. He succeeded in establishing the totalitarian theocracy that still holds the country in its grip. But the regime has internal divisions. Policies have changed several times under elected presidents, who, however, must accept the dominance of the supreme religious leader.

The Shia/Sunni divide is centuries old. It emerged soon after prophet Muhammad had written the Koran in the seventh century. His faith had united Arabs and enabled them to fast create a new empire that stretched from the Arab peninsula to the Mediterranean coast. Nonetheless, the new religion suffered a bloody schism near its heartland. Unlike Sunnis, Shias have a formal clergy with a binding hierarchy.

In the 16th to 18th centuries, what is now Iran was the Shia empire of the Safavids. The Ottoman empire to its west and the Mughal empire to its east were both Sunni. The culture of Iran is marked by this legacy. Iran's mullahs have skilfully used the faith to entrench their power.

In recent decades, Tehran has been funding Shia militias across the region, including most prominently Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Syria, both Hezbollah and Iran long propped up the Assad regime. Assad's fall is closely linked to the fact that Israel's military has weakened not only Hezbollah, but Iran too. The Assads ran out of support from neighbouring countries. It mattered, of course, that the Assads adhere

to Alawism, a small Arab community of Shias. Fear of Sunni revenge was one reason why the Assads were so atrocious in their repression of other groups.

The leaders in Tehran have been using aggressive anti-Zionist rhetoric for many years. To what extent they really want to go to war with Israel is unclear. What is obvious is that the Shia regime's stance helps it to challenge governments of predominantly Sunni countries. It accuses them of having betrayed the pan-Islamic cause of liberating Palestinians.

## BARELY BRIDGEABLE DIVIDES

In this complicated setting, Hamas is the only organisation of either kind of Sunni Islamism that cooperates closely with Iran. Some observers even call it a subsidiary of Iran. However, Hamas quite clearly launched its atrocious terror attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 without approval from Tehran. Most likely the Sunni militia hoped to start a large regional war, involving Iran. So far, the theocracy has made efforts to avoid that war.

It is safe to say that the divides between the three traditions of Islamism are barely bridgeable. Peace in Syria now hinges on whether HTS, as the currently dominant force, proves capable of uniting the country. The mutual sense of hostility is quite strong, not only among different kinds of Islamist groups, but also between Muslims and other religious communities like Druzes and Christians. If the HTS manages Syria well, the country might become a hub of cooperation.

So far, Qatar was the centre of whatever interaction took place between the three different Islamist traditions. The background is that the al-Thani, Qatar's Royal family, must cooperate with Iran because the two countries share gas fields they are both exploiting in the Persian Gulf. This is an important reason why Qatar refuses to simply follow the Saudi lead of stringent opposition to Iran.

Another one is that the al-Thani claim a role of their own on the world stage. In this context, it makes sense to reach out to Muslim Brothers and even hosting expat Hamas leaders in Doha. The al-Thani's, moreover, do not want Qatar's highly influential Al-Jazeera TV programme to resonate only among Wahhabi-inspired communities. They are interested in global relevance.



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## STUDYING ABROAD

# International degrees, national development

*In an increasingly interconnected world, higher education plays a central role in shaping the future of individuals and therefore the future of societies. In countries like Uganda, having a foreign university degree makes a big difference.*

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BY RONALD SSEGUJJA SSEKANDI

Uganda has made efforts to improve both the scope and quality of education. The country has expanded universal primary and secondary education. It has also invested heavily in the quality of education by improving infrastructure, raising teachers' salaries and improving research and curriculum development. Despite these efforts, however, there are still numerous challenges. Many public schools and universities are poorly run and cannot provide the quality of education that learners need. Progress has also been slow in changing the curricula, which are still based on colonial education, to modern curricula that meet the needs and challenges of modern Uganda. As a result, the education system is failing to train the qualified workforce that the country needs for its development.

In this environment, many parents and learners are looking outside Uganda for better educational opportunities. Universities in countries such as the US, the UK and Germany are renowned in Uganda for their academic excellence,

cutting-edge research and state-of-the-art facilities. Students studying at these institutions can benefit from quality education and innovative teaching methods that are not available locally. In addition, studying abroad exposes students to a variety of academic perspectives. Institutions conduct advanced research through often very diverse students and lecturers. Exposure to different educational systems can foster critical thinking, adaptability and a broader understanding of global issues. When I came to Ruhr-Universität Bochum in 2020 to do a Master's in Development Management, I was able to experience how much the teaching institutions in Germany and those in Uganda diverge.

## PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Living and studying in a foreign country requires a high degree of independence and self-reliance. As a student in Germany, I had to adapt and learn how to manage my finances, find my way around new cities and complete my day-to-day tasks independently. These experiences

have significantly improved my problem-solving skills and resilience, which is invaluable in both my personal and professional life. Studying abroad further offers a unique opportunity for cultural exchange. I was part of a diverse group of over 20 students from all continents. At the time I was in Germany the Covid-19 pandemic made social distancing and online learning mandatory. Despite the difficulties, we found ways to connect, support each other and build lasting bonds. A foreign education enables one to acquire the ability to interact with people from different backgrounds, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of other cultures. This engagement not only broadens one's worldview, but also enhances the ability to work in a multicultural environment – which is becoming increasingly important in today's globalised job market.

“Studying abroad offers a unique opportunity for cultural exchange.”

Our author and a friend at their graduation ceremony at Ruhr-Universität Bochum.



Photo: Ronald Ssegujja Ssekandi

“Studying abroad allows you to build a global network of friends, mentors and professional contacts. These connections can be invaluable for future career prospects, whether in Uganda or internationally.”

### PROFESSIONAL ADVANTAGES

An international degree can open doors to a wide range of career opportunities that would not be possible with a local degree. Employers often view an international education as evidence of an applicant’s adaptability, determination and ability to navigate different environments. In addition, many universities abroad have strong links with leading companies and offer extensive career services, internships and networking opportunities that can greatly enhance employability. After my studies in Bochum, I returned to work in Uganda. However, many of my colleagues stayed in Germany where they found employment.

I have more clout with a German university degree. Employers value my educational background because of the quality attributed to a university education in a European country. In addition, studying abroad allows you to build a global network of friends, mentors and professional contacts. These connections can be invaluable for future career prospects, whether in Uganda or internationally. The friendships and professional relationships forged during studies often develop into lifelong networks. I still keep in touch with alumni from my degree programme today.

Upon returning to their home country, students who have studied abroad can bring back valuable knowledge, skills and innovative ideas. This knowledge transfer can contribute to national development by addressing local challenges. Graduates can introduce new technologies, practices and approaches that drive progress in various fields, from healthcare and education to business and technology.

### CHALLENGES

While a university degree abroad is valuable, it is not easy to obtain. The financial costs are the biggest obstacle. Tuition fees, living expenses and travel costs are a challenge for those seeking higher education abroad. Many families in Uganda live in poverty. They often take out large loans or rely on donations to allow their children to study abroad.

Without these strategies, only the political elite and the rich in Uganda would be able to send their children to foreign universities.

Thanks to funding from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), I was able to study at the Institute for Development Research and Development Policy (IEE) at Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Students should be aware of the numerous scholarships, grants and financial aid programmes available to help reduce the costs. However, the search for a scholarship also requires access to information, support and important networks.

Adapting to a new cultural and academic environment can furthermore be a challenge. Students may face language barriers, homesickness and cultural differences that affect their academic performance and general well-being. Universities abroad often offer support services, such as counselling centres and offices for international students, to help students navigate and adjust to their new environment. Life in Bochum during the pandemic was particularly hard for me. However, these inconveniences were only a small price to pay compared to the benefits of obtaining the foreign degree.



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Worms thrive in humus-rich soils.

## RURAL DEVELOPMENT

# Multiple benefit strategies make sense

BY SUSANNE NEUBERT

**L**and use normally has a well-defined purpose such as either food production, climate mitigation or the conservation of biodiversity. As demand for land is growing, different land uses are increasingly pitted against one another.

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WGBU – Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderung) therefore sees a “trilemma of land use”. However, the usefulness of any plot increases the more purposes it serves. Good examples are windmills that rise up above forests or fields under photovoltaic facilities installed up high. The WGBU recommends multiple-benefit strategies of this kind.

An important, though barely visible example is the accumulation of humus in agricultural soils. Humus consists of carbon molecules that result from decomposing plants. They can last for decades, if fields are not ploughed.

Humus stores large amounts of carbon and are rich in microorganisms. The approach thus serves both climate mitigation and biodiversity. Soils that contain a lot of humus, moreover, stay moist quite long and are more fertile than the mineralised soils that are common today.

There are many multiple-benefit strategies that serve a variety of purposes. Examples include rice cultivation combined with pisciculture and nitrogen-binding algae (azolla) or fish breeding linked to the growing of vegetables (aquaponics). Moreover, hedges along fields make sense because they reduce wind erosion whilst offering shelter to pest-hunting animals. The application of pesticides tends to be counter-productive in settings like this.

Multiple-benefit strategies make land use more valuable, though they do not necessarily increase financial returns. After all, farms are not paid money for soil organisms and the prevention of drought-induced damage sometime in

the future. Preventive action pays in the long run, of course, but the exact monetary value may be impossible to pin down. There is no doubt, however, that the economy – and society as a whole – benefit from multiple usage of plots.

Tying rural subsidies to multiple-benefit strategies and ecological intensification would therefore be legitimate. The EU would do well to move on from its current Common Agricultural Policy, which basically subsidises acreage, to a Common Ecosystem Policy that would promote multiple land-use.

Successful implementation of multiple-benefit strategies actually requires more knowledge and often also more labour than conventional agriculture does. Artificial intelligence (AI) could prove useful in regard to information processing, by identifying and optimising synergies. Intelligent automation of processes in the field, moreover, could boost labour productivity.

Multi-benefit strategies, however, do not only make sense in the heavily mechanised agriculture of high-income countries. Subsistence farmers in countries with low incomes might benefit as well. Rice-fish-azolla cultivation is attractive in humid regions. Conservation agriculture, moreover, is a hot topic in many countries, and agro-silvo-pastoral systems offer potential livelihoods to smallholders as well as herders.

#### Link

WGBU, 2020: Rethinking land in the Anthropocene.  
[wbgu.de/en/publications/publication/landshift](https://wbgu.de/en/publications/publication/landshift)



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## PLANT-GENETIC RESOURCES

# Essential, but neglected

*Traditional crops tend to be nutritious and resilient. They fit the local conditions of ecosystems. Both the food industry and industrial-scale agriculture, however, rely on only a handful of globally grown species. This imbalance harms the environment and reduces humanity's food security.*

---

BY HILDEGARD LINGNAU AND STEFAN SCHMITZ

**W**heat, maize and rice are the main staple foods around the world. They grow on more than half of the fields on Earth and account for two thirds of humankind's global calorie intake. There are several, interrelated reasons for this striking imbalance. They include the industrialisation of both agriculture and food processing as well as selective prioritisation by agricultural researchers and professional plant breeders.

This concentration has some advantages, but also many disadvantages. In the past 75 years, the focusing on a small number of mass products facilitated the provision of huge amounts of staple foods at comparatively low cost. Unfortunately, the improved yields of wheat, maize and rice go along with serious environmental problems.

About three quarters of all crops disappeared from the fields in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to an estimate published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1996. Some residuals of the once huge multitude are still found in geographical and economic niches, including in particular subsistence farms in remote areas of countries with low and middle incomes.

Initially, it was publicly funded agricultural research that focused on a small number of crops. Private research and professional breeding followed. Next, farmers adapted to the trend, and so did consumers. As the yield and quality of the plants that were thoroughly researched and professionally bred improved fast, neglected plants became

less and less attractive. Eventually, the neglected and underutilised species (NUS) became almost worthless in commercial terms.

Today we see how problematic this trend has been. It has blocked important developmental opportunities. Any reduction of biological diversity, moreover, weakens the resilience of ecosystems. The excessively narrow focus on only very few crops is at the root of serious environmental and economic risks.

It is environmentally hazardous, for example, that pests and diseases often spread dramatically. Such events generally necessitate massive agrochemical usage, which further reduces biological diversity. High yielding varieties, moreover, also require unsustainable amounts of water and fertiliser.

A particularly important economic risk is the disruption or even collapse of supply chains. The Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine showed how quickly this affected availability and prices in disadvantaged world regions.

## THREE GROUPS OF CROPS

The many thousands of edible crops roughly belong in three groups. The first is well researched and in strong global demand (examples are wheat, maize and rice, but also potatoes, apples or oilseeds like sunflower or palm nuts). The second group has only sporadically attracted researchers' attention and is basically only used in specific

world regions (sorghum, millets, sweet potatoes or okra, for example). Species of the third group are only known locally and to few experts.

The neglect of the third group is putting food security at risk. Unfortunately, policies of the past only focused on fighting hunger in the narrow sense of providing sufficient amounts of calories. Plants that are rich in protein and micronutrients did not get sufficient attention. They are, however, essential if masses of people are to enjoy balanced diets. For some 2 billion people around the world, that has become barely affordable.

There are many reasons to invest more in so far neglected crops. Doing so would help to eliminate poverty (SDG1) and eradicate hunger (SDG2). Traditional varieties tend to be resilient and particularly well-adapted to local environments of areas stricken by poverty. Cultivation costs are therefore comparatively low. These plants provide healthy food even in extreme ecological settings.

Traditionally grown species, moreover, protect people from malnutrition. They contain essential nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants as well as

“Policy must set the right incentives and disincentives. International-development policy is particularly important.”

micronutrients like iron, zinc or vitamin A. This is very important especially for children, women and elderly people.

Traditional plant varieties generally require neither much water nor much fertiliser. They facilitate low-input agriculture because they suit the ecosystems in which rural communities have been cultivating them for centuries.

In view of global heating, environmental viability matters at both local and global levels. Traditional varieties offer rural families who depend on subsistence farming some protection against the impacts of extreme weather. Moreover,

**Teff is a neglected species even though it is a staple food in Ethiopia: harvest in the Amhara region in 2023.**

Photo: picture-alliance/Bildagentur-online/Sunny Celeste



they allow them to earn some money by selling produce on local markets. Internationally, the prevalent global agri-food system is emitting about one third of all of human-kind's greenhouse gases. The reason is its huge demand for inputs and energy. At the same time, climate impacts are making the deficits of the global system's narrow focus increasingly more obvious. High-yielding rice varieties are becoming unviable for smallholders in eastern India, for example.

In large parts of Africa and Latin America, drought and heat are also increasingly hampering maize cultivation. Sorghum and millets would be more resilient alternatives. They also have the advantage of growing faster. In some regions, farmers are already being advised to switch. The switch to these traditional crops would be easier of course, if they were better researched and had been bred systematically.

### TRANSFORMATION TO SUSTAINABILITY

A rethink has begun, both in science and international policy making. In 2024, for example, the G7 ministers for international development declared themselves in favour of "climate-resilient, sustainable food systems" and stressed the relevance of agricultural biodiversity. They pointed out, for example, that it is essential to conserve plant genetic diversity in seed banks.

A full transformation towards sustainability will require change at three levels:

- the supply of seeds,
- the demand for seeds and
- the policy environment.

The supply-side is shaped by research and breeding in formal as well as informal contexts. Multilateral, governmental and private actors all have a role to play. They must pay more attention to so far neglected species.

An important opportunity for promoting this paradigm shift is the ongoing redefinition of the portfolio of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Two of its prominent members are the International Rice Research Institute in Manila and the International Potato Center in Lima. One must not overestimate the CGIAR's influence, but it has certainly contributed very much to the concentration of the current global agri-food system.

On the demand side, agriculture and food-processing industries determine which plants are grown and what products are marketed. Ultimately, consumer choices matter too, of course. When a good is in popular demand, suppliers will strive to produce a lot of it.

Policy must thus set the right incentives and disincentives. International-development policy is particularly important, not least because these government departments contribute massively to CGIAR funding. By making the right budget decisions, governments can make the paradigm shift happen. Policymakers should therefore:

- support efforts to research and breed so far neglected and under-utilised species,
- promote seed banks that conserve plant-genetic resources and keep seeds available,
- involve low- and middle-income countries' national agricultural research systems in international contexts,
- ensure that farmers, who best understand traditional varieties and their benefits, are involved, as well as,
- set the right incentives for agriculture and the food industry, for example by reducing investment risks,
- offer training to staff from agricultural-extension and rural-advisory services,
- learn the lessons of successfully revitalised plants such as spelt, quinoa and moringa, and on this basis,
- support the development of local, regional and global supply chains for these plants.

The success of development policy always hinges on good cooperation of all parties based on partnership principles. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the opportunities of disadvantaged people in ways that enable them to take their fate into their own hands instead of suffering helplessly.



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## OVERCOMING COLONIALISM

# Cooperation, not assistance

*What would it look like to engage in fair international cooperation that does not uphold colonial patterns? That is the question that participants considered at a BMZ event in Berlin. Many called for a new approach to improve partnerships.*

BY JÖRG DÖBEREINER

From November 1884 to February 1885, European colonial powers laid the foundation to partition Africa among themselves at the so-called Berlin Conference – with no regard for the interests of the people living in the territories in question. Oppression and exploitation followed. Today, 140 years later, the negative con-

sequences of colonialism can still be seen, as the Focus section of our Digital Monthly edition from November 2024 describes.

Colonial patterns also persist in international relations, not only because of the continued economic dependence

**Discussion panel at the BMZ event Rethinking development policy:  
How to confront coloniality.**



of low-income countries, but also because some forms of “development cooperation” better serve the interests of donors than of people in recipient countries.

“There is no small number of aid givers who often mirror colonial hierarchies while recipients are left navigating the scars of dependency and diminished agency”, said Martin Kimani. He was the Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations and is the Executive Director of New York University’s Center on International Cooperation (CIC). According to him, there is “an unspoken assumption that the global north holds the solutions while the south remains a passive recipient of knowledge, capital and expertise”. As a result, he claimed, development often reinforces dependency rather than fostering self-reliance.

Kimani sees various “echoes of a colonial logic that values control over collaboration”, including:

- aid that requires compliance with foreign priorities,
- technical assistance that is detached from local realities and
- policies shaped by foreign experts.

### **RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT POLICY: HOW TO CONFRONT COLONIALITY**

Martin Kimani spoke in December at a conference organised by Germany’s Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) entitled “Rethinking development policy: How to confront coloniality”. Participants from civil society, academia, politics and business discussed what fair development cooperation could look like. It was the first public event by the BMZ to address colonial continuities in international cooperation at the highest level. It took place in Berlin and was streamed live online.

Participants made direct reference to the 1884/85 Berlin Conference. Development Minister Svenja Schulze called it an “abhorrent key moment in colonialism” and an “expression of the sense of superiority that we still unfortunately encounter today, 140 years later”. According to Schulze, Germany has not yet adequately addressed its own responsibility, though it has made a start.

Schulze stated that the BMZ wants cooperation to become more partnership-oriented in the future. For example, the ministry is working increasingly to dismantle asymmetrical power structures in the international system, for instance by promoting more participation from countries of the global south in international financial institutions.



**Martin Kimani, Executive Director of the Center on International Cooperation (CIC), New York University, and former Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations.**

Birgit Pickel, Director-General Africa at BMZ, emphasised that it is necessary to move away from the donor/recipient mindset and take partners’ priorities as a starting point. The BMZ could provide more support for local and regional initiatives, expand instruments like south-south and triangular cooperation and better integrate local and precolonial knowledge, she said.

### **REFORMING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Martin Kimani emphasised that challenges like weak state capacity, fragile legitimacy and economic vulnerability are not merely the results of mismanagement by African leaders but can also be attributed to the persistence of the colonial legacy in the state structures of many African countries. “Most African states were never designed to serve their populations,” he said.

“Colonial patterns also persist in international relations, not only because of the continued economic dependence of low-income countries, but also because some forms of ‘development cooperation’ better serve the interests of donors than of people in recipient countries.”

As a remedy, Kimani suggested better implementing reforms that are already underway and “revolutionising” international cooperation. While Germany needs a new growth model, Africa, with its young population, rapid urbanisation and economic potential, “offers a pathway to mutual renewal and growth,” according to Kimani. The goal should be a “genuine partnership”. Germany could profit, for example, with regard to its economic resiliency and geopolitical relevance, Kimani said.

### OVERCOMING UNEQUAL STRUCTURES

At the moment, actors from the global south often feel like second-class citizens in their own country, said Dylan Mathews. He is the CEO of the British-American civil-society organisation Peace Direct, which published a report in 2021 entitled “Time to decolonise aid”. It addresses, for example, the unequal power dynamics in the international aid system. “In the pursuit of helping, we have actually harmed,” claimed Mathews. The agency of local people has been undermined, he continued, by the assumption that they have nothing to offer.

For Mathews, it is important to consider what “success” means in a development context. Instead of just paying

attention to technical outputs, he believes that experts should develop a deeper understanding of the long-term transformation of societies. He argued that change must start with examining one’s own ways of thinking and speaking. It begins with the word “development”: whose development are we talking about? And on what terms?

### MORE DISCUSSION WITH PARTNERS

The participants praised the BMZ event. Martin Kimani described it as an “essential step towards reshaping the systems of international cooperation that define our collective future”. The audience, however, also made some critical remarks. For example, one audience member faulted the fact that the podium discussion did not include any representatives from Germany’s former colonies. The topic of reparations for the descendants of the victims of colonial rule was also brought up.

How should Germany come to terms with its own colonial past? What consequences does it have for current development policy? Whichever government is in office after the upcoming parliamentary elections will have to confront these questions.

### LINKS

BMZ: Recording of the event on 4 December (in English, German, Spanish and French): [bmz.de/de/aktuelles/rethinking-development-policy-how-to-confront-coloniality](https://bmz.de/de/aktuelles/rethinking-development-policy-how-to-confront-coloniality)

Peace Direct, 2021: Time to decolonise aid. [peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/](https://peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/)



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## BEAUTY INDUSTRY

# Empowering women through natural skincare in Kenya

*A new wave of Kenyan entrepreneurs is transforming the beauty industry by promoting natural products and redefining beauty standards for a healthier future.*

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BY CIKU KIMANI-MWANIKI

**T**he last decade has seen a shift in the beauty-products industry in Kenya. In the 1990s, just about when televisions hit many Kenyan living rooms, beautiful women graced advertising slots, and many women envied their beauty. The ads assured women that they too could look that beautiful if they used the advertised beauty products. This form of advertising worked, and women's dressing tables were inundated with those products.

A shift happened when experts started calling out many of the products for containing dangerous chemicals meant to eliminate melanin in black skin to achieve a lighter tone. Colonialism had successfully sold African women the lie that the lighter their skin, the prettier they were. By the end of the 20th century, these products containing corticosteroids, hydro-



“It can only get better from this point as people are appreciating skin care products that do not contain steroids that damage the skin.”

quinone, mercury and other agents harmful to the skin, were a dime a dozen, and the results of their toxic nature were visible on women who used them.

According to a 2023 World Health Organization report, the use of skin-bleaching products varies significantly across the continent, ranging from 25% in Mali to 77% in Nigeria. Over the years, skin-bleaching scandals have been reported from different corners of the continent.

The tide has changed. Campaigners against these harmful products are using social media to spell out the dangers and offer alternatives. Dark skinned models have become more popular, giving dark skinned women the feeling of being validated. The growing awareness for harmful skin products has started as a campaign against skin lightening and has now become a vital income source.

### **ENTREPRENEURS REDEFINING BEAUTY WITH NATURAL PRODUCTS**

Pendo Samson Makomba is the proprietor of PendoTips. Her relationship with natural products was highly influenced by her mother who used herbs to treat Pendo when she developed stomach ulcers at a tender age. “My teenage life came with painful menses, all managed with herbs.”

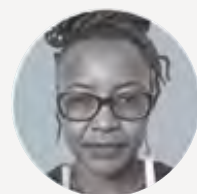
In 2013, Pendo started selling chia seeds. The product did well, so she opened a shop in the heart of Nairobi. Another one of her products, sea moss, hit the market five years later, gaining similar popularity. Pendo’s products now include activated charcoal, molasses, collagen, milk thistle and many others. “On my social media page, I explain how these products are used and what they are good for, and a lot of my business is from satisfied repeat clients and recommendations,” she says. For quality purposes, Pendo follows her suppliers from the source and avoids mass production.

Ann Chiuri, popularly known by her brand names Ann Exotiq or Exotiq Lyd Organics, is a farmer and interior designer.

She runs “Tonga farm”, where she rears sheep and goats. She processes skincare products from these goats’ milk and plant botanicals.

“About three years ago when my mom was fighting cancer, a friend recommended that we stop using cow milk and replace it with goat milk. This was music to my mom’s ears because she loved milky tea,” she says. That was how Ann discovered the healing properties of goat milk and delved further into research. Three years on, she has developed soaps and body creams designed to clear acne and eczema, among others.

As goat milk-based skin products are a relatively new concept, Ann spends a lot of time raising awareness on the many benefits of goat milk. She has opened a physical shop at the Greenhouse Mall, a high-end shopping centre on Nairobi’s Ngong Road. “It can only get better from this point as people are appreciating skin care products that do not contain steroids that damage the skin,” she says.



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SOCIAL MEDIA

# European democracies under attack from North America

*One of the purposes of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) is to limit disinformation on the internet. The time has come to apply this legislation determinedly.*

---

BY HANS DEMBOWSKI

**E**lon Musk is the richest man on Earth and owns X/Twitter. He keeps insulting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer in his posts. In January, he also published a conversation with Alice Weidel, the leader of Germany's far-right AfD. It included lies such as Adolf Hitler having been a communist rather than a right-wing extremist. Musk told German listeners to vote for the AfD. Like populist outfits elsewhere, it has a tendency to promote moneyed interests.

Last year, Musk spent \$ 270 million to support Donald Trump's election campaign. His pro-Trump posts on X may have been worth another \$ 100 million to judge by what it costs to promote a tweet. After he endorsed the twice-impeached former president, moreover, his own – and other right-wing accounts – suddenly became much more popular. According to the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, the X algorithm was probably tweaked at that point.

## “Democratic societies need a minimum level of trust in the public sphere. What Musk is doing and what Zuckerberg hopes to copy only undermines trust.”

### MISLEADING “FREE SPEECH” RHETORIC

Musk has a track record of attacking democracy in Brazil. He is now turning against elected leaders in Germany and Britain. He claims their governments are suppressing the freedom of speech online. He fails to mention that corporate algorithms play a key role in what messages are distributed to how many users. It is noteworthy, moreover, that he does not demand free speech from China’s dictatorial regime, on which his Tesla business depends.

EU legislation, of course, does not restrict free speech. It is designed to prevent the spread of lies, hate speech and anti-democratic propaganda. Accordingly, very large platforms with masses of users have a legal duty to moderate messages and to take down harmful disinformation they are aware of.

After Musk bought Twitter two years ago, moderation efforts were relaxed, and right-wing extremists were allowed back onto the platform. Now that Musk is intervening in Germany’s election campaign, the European Commission should force X to adhere fully to European law.

### NO TIME TO LOSE

The Commission must not lose time. Adding to the urgency, Mark Zuckerberg, whose corporation Meta owns Facebook, Instagram and other digital platforms, has announced he will follow Musk’s example regarding fact checking and content moderation. This multi-billionaire too has adopted a misleading freedom-of-expression rhetoric, downplaying the relevance of algorithms.

Many media pundits argue that Zuckerberg is opportunistically trying to please Trump, after having banned him for two years because of the 6 January riot. They probably miss something. Zuckerberg may well be using Trump, not caving in to him. The Silicon Valley titan says he wants

the new USA administration to put pressure on allies that regulate social media.

There is evidence of Meta platforms doing harm. In Myanmar, genocidal messages were spread on Facebook. Moreover, social media can hurt teenagers’ mental health. Zuckerberg never showed much interest in these things, and his success depends on as many people as possible spending as much time as possible on Meta platforms. Messaging that stimulates anger, envy, hate and other negative feelings helps to glue users to their screens. It thus maximises profits.

So far, Zuckerberg is discontinuing fact checking and moderation only in the USA, but he would obviously like to do so in Europe too. The EU must insist on its rules. Democratic societies need a minimum level of trust in the public sphere. What Musk is doing and what Zuckerberg hopes to copy only undermines trust.

### DYSTOPIAN PRESENT

Just how dystopian society becomes in a post-truth era became clear in the USA shortly before Trump’s second inauguration. In mid-January, Los Angeles was burning. Months of severe drought had turned vegetation into perfect tinder, and strong winds fanned the flames. On social media, right-wing climate deniers, including Trump himself, were posting slurs, blaming everything on the supposed incompetence of California’s elected officials.

The EU must get its act together. European democracy is normally not under attack from North America, but it is happening now. It is similarly unusual, that, apart from former EU member Britain, the BRICS+ member Brazil may be the EU’s most important ally in this scenario. Though the government of President Lula da Silva generally opposes western hegemony, both it and the country’s independent judiciary have proven determined to fight back against digital giants that are run by oligarchs.



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Climate-related damages are getting worse: burnt houses in Los Angeles in January 2025.

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

# Irreversible climate disaster

*Last year was the hottest on record, and the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degree goal was breached. Earth is in a perilous state, but bad-faith propaganda of interest groups still tends to outweigh good-faith research by scientists.*

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BY ROLI MAHAJAN

**T**he global environmental crisis keeps escalating. A series of multilateral conferences in the final quarter of last year failed to make any serious difference. The interrelated topics were biodiversity, climate, plastic waste and desertification.

The conferences did not heed scientific alarm bells. The most important warning was perhaps the 2024 State of the Climate Report, which was written by a team of scientists led by William Ripple of Oregon State University and published in the journal *BioScience*.



The report begins with: “We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster.” To judge by “planetary vital signs”, global heating is now in a new phase. The signs include global temperatures, pollution levels, greenhouse-gas emissions, fossil-fuel subsidies, loss of forest cover, meat production and many others. Of 35 such vital indicators, 25 now exceed the sustainability threshold.

Climate scientists thus increasingly doubt global warming can be limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. According to the report, 80% of the scientific community expect temperature to rise by at least 2.5°C, with half predicting a rise of 3°C.

### FEEDBACK LOOPS AND TIPPING POINTS

The report’s discussion of feedback loops and tipping points is particularly alarming. Feedback loops are circular, self-reinforcing trends. Tipping points are marks after which a trend cannot be reversed anymore.

The report identifies at least 28 feedback loops that are accelerating global heating. It warns that several tipping points are likely to be crossed at 1.5°C. The tipping points include the melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, the thawing of boreal permafrost or the destruction of coral reefs.

Indeed, triggering a single tipping point could set off a cascade of irreversible changes. That would be the case, for example, if the melting of the Greenland ice sheet disrupted ocean currents and undermined the stability of the Amazon rainforest. The consequences for humanity would be devastating, not only in terms of extreme weather. We would also see famines, mass migration and violent conflict. The authors call for more research on feedback loops and tipping points.

### DANGEROUS TRENDS

The report considers oceans and forests and points out dangerous trends. The survival of coral reefs hangs by a thread. Heat and acidification lead to mass-death events of marine wildlife in other ways too. Earth’s tree cover declined by more than 40% to 28.3 mega hectares in 2023. Wildfires caused not quite half of this loss. The carbon set free by forest destruction, of course, accelerates global heating.

The scholars welcome the increase in renewable energy use but point out that fossil fuels continue to be the primary problem. Fossil-fuel consumption exceeded renewables by a factor of 14 in 2023.

The report emphasises that the climate crisis is a social justice crisis too. Poor communities in Africa, Asia and Latin

America have done very little to cause the problems but are suffering the worst impacts. The authors speak of a “profound polycrisis” that threatens the stability of human civilisation itself.

“Fossil-fuel consumption exceeded renewables by a factor of 14 in 2023.”

The scholars want everyone to know that, though our situation is serious, we have both the knowledge and capability to tackle climate change. Solutions exist, and many are becoming economically viable. According to the report, climate change should figure prominently in secondary-school curricula as well as in higher learning. What is needed is decisive action, and the better people understand what is at stake, the more likely such action becomes.

The scientists work in good faith. A peer-review by other scholars ensured that the report is evidence-based, nuanced and sober. Unfortunately, bad-faith propaganda by interest groups often proves more forceful. Lobby organisations praising the merits of conventional growth too often prevail at global conferences, wilfully ignoring that what they propose is leading to disaster. Their influence is multiplied by the fact that a small number of petrostates can block multilateral consensus as was seen at last year’s UN climate summit in Baku.

### Link

The 2024 state of the climate report:  
[academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biae087/7808595](https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biae087/7808595)



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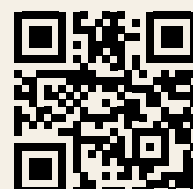
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GENDER EQUALITY

# Women's resistance



Photo: Shamsia Hassani

"This is the Story of Migration": artwork by graffiti artist Shamsia Hassani from Afghanistan, exhibited at the STRAAT museum in Amsterdam.

## EDITORIAL

# Women are leading change

*Around the world, women are campaigning against inequality and the abuse of power to achieve more democracy and freedom for all. Yet many of their successes go largely unnoticed.*

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BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

In the spring of 2019, Alaa Salah stands on a car roof in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Surrounded by thousands of people, she sings: “We will not be silent in the face of the tyrant!” The crowd shouts: “Revolution!” The photograph of her in a white dress became the symbol of a movement that led to the peaceful overthrow of dictator Omar al-Bashir. It was strongly supported by Sudanese women. After 30 years of oppression, they were now at the forefront of the struggle for freedom from dictatorship and for their own rights.

The icons of the great protest movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were typically men, such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X or Desmond Tutu. Today, they are mostly women: Greta Thunberg founded Fridays for Future, Shakira Wafula became a face of the Gen Z protests in Kenya, Maria Kolesnikova embodies resistance in Belarus. Even Black Lives Matter was initiated by women. The global feminist movement is now more connected than ever and is about much more than women’s rights. Women are fighting for human rights, justice and democracy. In Argentina they are standing up against cuts to social services, in Mexico against murders and forced disappearances, in Nigeria against police violence, in Poland against authoritarian politics. Women are particularly affected by all of these issues.

Governments that restrict women’s rights also tend to suppress other human-rights and civil liberties. The development of women’s rights is therefore also a barometer for free societies: In a functioning democracy guided by the rule of law, women gradually gain rights, protection and justice. However, when women’s rights are curtailed, it is often a sign of autocratic tendencies. Misogyny and autocracy reinforce each other, scholars have found: Those

who want to consolidate power hierarchies tend to crack down on women. “The oppressive state is a rapist” – this phrase echoed around the world in the anthem of the MeToo movement, “Un violador en tu camino” (“A rapist in your path”).

Autocracies are on the rise around the world. This makes a strong women’s movement all the more important. Yet we hear little about most women’s struggles and achievements, since their resistance is often quiet, and progress takes time. But women are not silent anywhere, not even in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have literally silenced their voices. Across the world, from Uzbekistan to Nigeria, women are fighting for laws against domestic violence, campaigning for education and health and taking legal action against exploitation in the workplace. Domestic workers in Brazil are organising, as are market women in Tanzania. Activists are entering politics and fighting for human rights and equal opportunities.

All these initiatives and personal struggles are making a difference. Women around the world are a driving force for greater justice, democracy and freedom. This affects us all, and their achievements deserve more attention.



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## FEMALE ACTIVISM

# Women's rights advocates share their stories

*How do they advocate for women's rights? What are their biggest challenges and achievements? Five women from different world regions talk about their experiences.*

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## Flavia Agnes — India



Photo: Flavia Agnes

**Legal rights mean little if you can't claim them: In India, women's rights lawyer Flavia Agnes supports women from marginalised communities to seek their rights and fight against gender-based violence.**

In India, women face extreme violence both in the domestic sphere and in society at large. Domestic violence, rape, sexual violence, incest and sexual harassment at the workplace are rampant. We have sufficient laws to address these issues, such as the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act. But our judicial system is archaic: Cases take a long time to be decided and the conviction rate is very low. Moreover, legal

services are inaccessible to many, especially women and children from marginalised communities. As a lawyer who has actively litigated in trial and higher courts in Mumbai, I wanted to provide quality legal services to women and children to seek justice. In 1991, I founded Majlis Legal Centre, a legal advocacy centre for women and children. The centre's team of women lawyers and social workers also provides socio-legal support to victims of domestic and sexual violence.

“We provide quality legal services to women who seek justice.”

### FLAVIA AGNES

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“Even though they are in darkness, their hearts are full of hope.”



## Shamsia Hassani — Afghanistan

**Graffiti artist Shamsia Hassani once painted colourful murals on the walls and facades of Kabul city. Today, she lives in exile – but she keeps on painting, trying to give hope to the people of her homeland.**

I was born in Tehran, Iran, to Afghan parents and lived as a refugee there. After the Taliban fell, my family decided to move back to Afghanistan, but the situation worsened day by day, and many people left their beloved homeland. Currently, Afghan women are deprived of basic human rights, and I am very concerned about the girls of the new generation: Not having the right to education and freedom has plunged them into a black hole.

As an artist, I may not be able to bring about significant change, but I don't want to stay silent. I want to know I did my best. Each piece I create, whether it is about women, humanity, or people living in war and conflict, is a reminder to the world not to forget about the people in Afghanistan, about the problems Afghan women face and that they fight with patience and perseverance.

If my work brings even one per cent of positive change or a moment of hope to people, I am working for that one percent and that one moment. I want to be a source of



Photos: Shamsia Hassani, shamsiahassani.net

hope for the people of Afghanistan, especially for the women of my country – for those who live in darkness in Afghanistan and those who, like me, live in exile with heavy hearts. I want to convey that, even in the darkest times, their hearts are full of hope, of abilities, dreams and big goals for the future. Among the bleakness, they envision a bright future.

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## Kamola Alieva — *Uzbekistan*

**Law professor Kamola Alieva from Uzbekistan is part of a group of activists who have persistently campaigned against violence against women. Their advocacy resulted in the government criminalising domestic violence in 2023.**

In Uzbekistan, women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence, have limited access to leadership positions and fewer economic opportunities. Social norms and patriarchal attitudes still confine women to traditional roles. As an associate professor at Tashkent State University of Law, I lead a group of students dedicated to creating awareness videos on violence against women. I also conduct trainings for government officials, judges and journalists on gender-sensitive policies and combating gender-based violence.

The women's rights movement has already brought about significant progress. Women's participation in education and public life has increased, and the criminalisation of domestic violence in 2023 was a milestone. The amendment includes the establishment of protection mechanisms such as women's shelters and rehabilitation centres for victims of violence. It was achieved after years of sustained activism. Feminist activists drew attention to the issue through effective advocacy, public awareness

campaigns and strategic partnerships with international organisations. The most important element of success was probably the constructive dialogue between civil society and government officials: It fostered mutual understanding and paved the way for cooperation.

However, there are gaps in policy implementation and law enforcement. Shelters and rehabilitation centres need to be made more accessible and their quality improved. There is still resistance within society to reforms aimed at gender equality. Ensuring accountability and strengthening law enforcement remain key to sustaining the progress that has been made.

“The criminalisation of domestic violence was a milestone.”



Photo: Kamola Alieva

### KAMOLA ALIEVA

is a lawyer and women's rights activist. She serves as the Acting Associate Professor of Constitutional Law at Tashkent State University of Law (TSUL).

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“We have taken several transnational corporations to court.”

### Alejandra Ancheita — Mexico

**When workers are exploited or indigenous land rights are threatened, feminist lawyer Alejandra Ancheita doesn't hesitate to bring mining and energy giants to court. Her ProDESC initiative supports women from indigenous communities, migrants and factory workers.**

Gender inequality and structural violence are deeply entrenched in Mexico. Women are over-represented in precarious and informal labour markets, often without adequate pay, social protection or legal recognition. Gender-based violence and impunity are alarmingly high, and although we now have a female president, decision-making positions are still predominantly held by men. Access to justice is particularly poor for women from indigenous and marginalised communities, leaving many trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation.

I've seen this through my work with ProDESC (Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales), which accompanies maquila workers, day labourers, temporary migrant workers, artisans, sex workers, delivery workers and workers in the gig economy. As a feminist lawyer and human-rights defender, I've founded ProDESC to combat systemic violence and exploitation. We aim to achieve fair working conditions and protect indigenous communities' access to land and natural resources. We also hold companies to account when rights are violated: We have taken several transnational corporations to national and international accountability mechanisms.

The women's rights movement in Mexico has secured the implementation of the General Law on Women's Access



Photo: ProDESC

to a Life Free from Violence and a recent constitutional reform aimed at reducing the gender pay gap. Advocacy has also led to greater protection for working women, particularly in the informal sector, such as the national care system. Public advocacy campaigns have raised issues of workplace discrimination and gender violence nationally. However, many of these reforms exist only on paper. The journey towards comprehensive justice and equality remains a formidable challenge.

#### **ALEJANDRA ANCHEITA**

is a feminist lawyer and human-rights defender from Mexico, founder and executive director of Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales (ProDESC) and the Initiative for Transnational Justice (IJT).

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## Shamsa Araweelo — UK

**A survivor of female genital mutilation living in the UK, Shamsa Araweelo spent years desperately seeking proper medical treatment. She became an advocate for survivors of violence – and is hugely successful on social media.**

“On TikTok, I reach millions of people worldwide.”

I am a Somali woman living in the UK and a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM). I use my personal experience to raise awareness about FGM and Honour-Based Violence (HBV). On TikTok alone, I have over 380,000 followers and a reach of over 100 million people worldwide. In 2023, I was named one of BBC’s 100 Women in 2023.

A major challenge for survivors of FGM and HBV in the UK is the lack of training for medical professionals. Staff often receive only a one-hour training session, which is insufficient to provide compassionate, trauma-informed care. Many survivors therefore avoid accessing health-care services. They frequently report feeling dismissed or judged when they seek help. Services such as psychosexual support are often either inaccessible or unknown to them, leaving many isolated, unsupported and struggling with unresolved trauma. In addition, there is no standardised system for reporting cases of FGM or HBV, leading to inconsistent responses. Survivors need to feel heard, understood and protected, but the system often falls short.

There has been some progress in recognising the seriousness of FGM. But a lot of funding is going into awareness raising, while we are failing to tackle the root of the problem: Education is the key to prevention. Teaching about FGM must become part of the national curriculum in schools and medical courses at university.

There are some new laws, such as the FGM Protection Orders, which aim to protect women and girls at risk of FGM. However, reports show that there has actually been a 15% increase in cases of FGM recorded by general practitioners and hospitals in the UK since 2016. We need to move beyond simply talking about FGM and start implementing practical, preventative measures – including mandatory, in-depth training for professionals and better promotion of survivor-focused services.

### SHAMSA ARAWEELO

is a public speaker, trainer, social activist and expert on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

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Photo: Shamsa Araweelo



## MISOGYNY AND AUTHORITARIANISM

# “Non-conformity is the most important form of protest”

*When authoritarians are on the rise, it's bad news for women's rights: Macarena Sáez of Human Rights Watch explains why the fight for women's autonomy is also a fight for democracy – and how women around the world are uniting to move forward.*

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MACARENA SÁEZ INTERVIEWED BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

**To begin with, let's take a look at where we are: How have women's rights fared around the world in recent years?**

There are two contrasting trends: Some countries have made improvements, while others have gone backwards. In Latin America, for example, there has been tremendous progress, with access to abortion now being considered a basic women's right in many countries. In the US, however, the constitutional right to decide whether to have an abortion was taken away after almost 50 years. This is an unusual and worrying development. Not to mention a country like Afghanistan, where the Taliban have practically erased women from public life. Even in Europe, women's rights have experienced a general setback.

**Many of these countries have experienced democratic decline. Harvard University researchers Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks found a correlation between “misogyny and authoritarianism”. Why is that?**

A reduction in women's freedoms tends to go hand in hand with a reduction in civil rights. Hungary's Prime Minister Victor Orbán has been obsessed with reducing reproductive rights, while at the same time curtailing freedom of expression. By contrast, it's hard to be misogynistic in a well-functioning democracy where people can rely on the rule of law. When a country has independent courts, democratic elections, a healthy civil society and freedom of

expression, women can and will fight for their rights. Progress in democracy is slow but steady.

**Traditional role models are often supported by conservative or religious groups. Isn't political ideology the determining factor, not autocracy?**

Authoritarianism has no ideology. It's a terrible fallacy to think that there's a difference between left-wing and right-wing authoritarians. What makes the difference is whether or not political leaders believe in the rule of law. The Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega, who came from the leftist Sandinista movement, is now supported by the Catholic Church. Or take Russia, which legalised abortion in the 1920s and promoted gender equality in the 1950s. Vladimir Putin has significantly reduced access, glorified the traditional role of mothers and is rewarding families with many children. In this respect, the country isn't very

“We need to be ready to react when women's rights are in decline. It is a sign of the erosion of democracy.”

The Green Wave has spread across Latin America: A police-woman raises her arm as she guards members of feminist collectives protesting in the streets of Mexico City in 2023. She wears a green ribbon in solidarity.



Photo: picture alliance/NurPhoto/Gerardo Vieyra

different from China: China went from a one-child policy to a two-child policy and now is urging women to have more children. Both regimes see women as an instrument of population control rather than as individuals with the right to decide about their own lives.

“The Green Wave is a historic example, it really showed the world the power of civil-society movements.”

**Would you even say that the restriction of women’s rights is one of the first signs of rising authoritarianism?**

Absolutely. The correlation between authoritarianism and women’s rights isn’t always obvious, because democracies haven’t been perfect in granting women’s rights either. But what makes the difference is the direction, if there is progress or regression. Whether you look at El Salvador, Nicaragua, Hungary or the United States: We need to raise our level of concern and be ready to react when women’s rights are in decline. It is a sign of the erosion of democracy.

**You talk about a woman’s right to abortion as if it was a matter of course. But it is a very sensitive issue. A lot of people are concerned about it and want to protect the foetus as well.**

Evidence shows that there is no contradiction between protecting foetal life and protecting women. It’s the other way round: If you protect women’s rights, you also protect the health of the pregnant woman and the life and health of the foetus.

**Latin America’s “Marea Verde”, or Green Wave, was a powerful recent women’s rights movement, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets for reproductive rights. The movement began in Argentina in 2020 and spread across the continent. High courts in Colombia, Mexico, Argentina and Chile have now recognised access to abortion as a women’s right. What else has the movement achieved?**

The Green Wave achieved what I call the social decriminalisation of abortion – a change in the way people talk about reproductive rights. It’s been a taboo subject for a long time, but now women are no longer ashamed to talk about their experiences. It has become a topic of family discussion. And these conversations are taking place even in countries where abortion rights are severely restricted, such as El Salvador and Nicaragua. But the Green Wave went far beyond reproductive rights and became a movement for civil rights and democracy. In

“When a country has independent courts, democratic elections, a healthy civil society and freedom of expression, women can and will fight for their rights. Progress in democracy is slow but steady.”

Mexico, people wore green bandanas – the symbol of the Green Wave – to protest against disappearances and torture.

### What made the Green Wave so powerful?

The Green Wave is a historic example; it really showed the world the power of civil-society movements. It was driven by many different women’s rights organisations and many women felt represented. Plus, the green bandanas were a very visible public symbol. But success also stemmed from strategic movement building. The huge rallies were the most visible part of the movement. At the same time, activist groups lobbied for legislative changes, while others were engaged in strategic litigation. Successful movements combine all three.

**Speaking of El Salvador: In December 2024, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the country responsible for obstetric violence. It was considered violence against women.**

This is a huge step forward. The case involved a woman who was forced to carry a pregnancy to term with an unviable foetus because medical personnel would not perform an abortion. The woman’s life was in danger, but the medical staff were unsure whether an abortion was legal. In its ruling, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights considered the lack of access to medical procedures to be a form of gender-based violence and held El Salvador responsible. Almost at the same time, the Human Rights Committee, the United Nations body that oversees compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, found



Rome, Italy, 2019: Women are performing the choreography of the song “Un violador en tu camino” (A rapist in your path), written by the Chilean feminist collective Lastesis.

that Ecuador and Nicaragua had violated the rights of girls who had been forced to carry pregnancies to term after sexual assault. The Committee explicitly found that forced pregnancy as a result of lack of access to abortion was a human rights violation.

**“It’s hard to be misogynistic in a well-functioning democracy where people can rely on the rule of law.”**

**Women in repressive regimes can’t take to the streets or appeal to the courts. What happens in countries like Iran or Afghanistan?**

Women there are not silent: They are the ones leading the movements for change, and I deeply admire that. It is no coincidence that there are so many imprisoned women in Iran. The Iranian movement is a human rights movement led also by women, but with the broad participation of many other groups in society. In Afghanistan, it is mainly women who are standing up for their own rights. Their protests range from holding signs in the streets, to small public gatherings, to individual acts of solidarity such as showing a little skin or wearing make-up under their burqas. Non-conformity is the most important form of protest. It’s very brave, because the situation in Afghanistan is extremely difficult. Now even houses with windows where women can be seen from the outside are forbidden. It’s not just that women are relegated to the private sphere – the private sphere has become much darker and more secluded than it used to be. And the international community is basically allowing this to happen.

**What should the international community do?**

For three years, the Taliban have been able to impose more and more restrictions. Denying women access to health-care is almost an invitation to death. But the Taliban can still send their male teams to major sporting events and their delegations to the United Nations. Do you think they will take that as a sign to stop? Six countries – Chile, Costa Rica, France, Luxembourg, Mexico and Spain – asked the International Criminal Court to investigate the situation of women in Afghanistan in 2024. Another four – Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands – want to take the Taliban to the International Court of Justice for violating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimina-

tion against Women (CEDAW). Afghan and international women’s rights organisations have also joined forces to call for gender apartheid to be codified as a crime against humanity. But none of this is enough. I mean, for more than three years now, girls haven’t been allowed to go to school beyond sixth grade!

**One thing that is striking about the women’s rights movement is that activists around the world are increasingly uniting and cooperating. Can you give us some examples?**

You may have heard of the song from Chile, “Un violador en tu camino”, a rapist in your path. It was written in 2019 by a feminist collective and went viral. Women all over the world have translated the lyrics, performed the choreography and shared their videos online – from Iran to Turkey, Israel and various places in Europe and Latin America. Also, imagine this: Iranian women singing the Chilean resistance song “The people united will never be defeated” (“El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido”) in Farsi at an Iranian university! Technology has made South-South cooperation much easier, and the women’s rights movement is very interconnected. Every four years, the AWID International Forum organises a conference for gender-justice activists where they all come together: women from Afghanistan and Iran, domestic and sex workers’ organisations, abortion-rights activists. All these small organisations in different countries are really moving things forward.



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## CROSS-BORDER FEMINISM

# African women on the rise

*The modern African women's movement unites people along and across ethnic boundaries, generations and colonial borders. Examples from Nigeria, Kenya and other parts of the continent show the progress made in women's rights and their ability to shape society. Despite certain setbacks, women are determined to defend what they have achieved.*

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BY AYA CHEBBI

In early November 2024, Simi Olusola passed away. Three years ago, while pregnant with her son, Simi ran for State House of Assembly in Ekiti State, Nigeria, but did not win. A few months following the elections, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy. Unhappy with setbacks in governance and women's rights in Nigeria, she was working on her 2027 election campaign while enduring her pain. Determined to share her experience she encouraged young mothers to run for politics and called on institutions to support them. She passed on at 34 years.

Simi embodies the feminist movement in Nigeria that showed us, in the past decade, the courage of young women who dare to lead. When 276 Chibok schoolgirls were kidnapped from their classes in 2014, for example, it sparked the Bring Back Our Girls movement, which brought attention to the plight of girls' education. "Injustice to anyone anywhere is injustice to everyone everywhere," says Aisha Yesufu, co-founder of the movement. While 82 Chibok girls were still in captivity in 2024 according to the

human-rights organisation Amnesty International, many of them managed to flee or have been rescued. The movement succeeded in both saving many girls and centring education as fundamental to society's progress.

## WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA AND KENYA

Feminist movements in Nigeria have increasingly become intersectional – they cut through different issues and social identities such as class, sexuality, religion, age or ethnic groups. They are rooted in governance questions and are challenging the status quo. Sit-ins and protests have been part of the DNA of the student movements in the 1980s and early 1990s which were directed against military dictatorship and school closures in Nigeria. However, millennials brought feminist victories with their ability to unite people along and beyond ethnic lines, ideologies and colonial borders.

In 2020, for example, a series of mass peaceful protests called for the complete disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a Nigerian police unit with a his-

tory of abuse of power. The Feminist Coalition (FemCo), a small alliance of young Nigerian feminists, managed to set up a network of lawyers, provide food, medical support and more for the predominantly young protesters. FemCo showed that when women organise, it is for the entire society, not just for women’s rights. “If we lose this SARS fight, women will still be the biggest losers,” said co-founder Odunayo Eweniyi. The movement indeed succeeded to end SARS. Equally important, FemCo opened up feminist conversations in a Nigeria that had long regarded the word “feminist” as an insult.

Similarly, Gen Z in Kenya showed us in the past few months the power of a united voice. In January 2024, Kenyan women took to the streets in the largest event ever held in the country against sexual and gender-based violence. The movement called for President Ruto to declare femicide a national crisis. Later in 2024, however, at least 97 women were killed within three months. Even though the Kenyan feminist movement has not yet achieved its ultimate demand, it urged the Kenyan government and other actors to take femicide seriously.

The issue remains pressing. According to the United Nations, almost 85,000 women and girls globally were intentionally killed in 2023, with Africa accounting for the highest number of victims of intimate partner/family member femicide relative to the size of its population (2.9 per 100,000; UN Women 2024). The home is the most dangerous place for women.

**NEW WAYS OF TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM**

A common denominator among feminist victories led by Millennials and Gen Z is digital activism, encompassing

- planned and digitally mobilised nationwide protests,
- facilitating real-time updates,
- countering misinformation and exposing abuses as well as
- crowdfunding for activists’ legal aid.

New tools include direct messages on Instagram, WhatsApp groups, Telegram communities, hashtags, X space debates, TikTok lives and Snapchat conversations

**At the 2024 Nalafem Summit in Windhoek, Namibia – a multigenerational platform for gender commitment in Africa.**



Photo: Nalafem

that are deleted after 24 hours. State and non-state institutions are forced to confront this digitally-savvy and highly organised force. The digital has become the tool and the battlefield.

One of the new ways of activism is being your own activist every day and exposing inequality by sharing your story. Women share their divorce and fight for children's custody live on Facebook. They call out the bride price in their Instagram stories or talk about walking out of abusive marriages. Patriarchy rewards women for silence, so the struggle is a struggle for voice.

These new ways of activism also fostered a ripple effect: African feminist movements have sparked action worldwide. For instance, the Gen Z protests in Kenya have spread to Uganda, Nigeria and Mozambique.

### WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

As much as patriarchy is gatekeeping leadership roles, especially by telling young women they are "too young to lead", an unapologetic generation of women who dare to lead is rising. They include:

- Bogolo Joy Kenewendo, Minister of Minerals and Energy of Botswana,
- Emma Theofelus, Minister of Information and Communication Technology of Namibia,
- Filsan Abdullahi Ahmed, former Minister of Women, Children and Youth in Ethiopia,
- Jaha Dukureh, a Gambian women's rights activist who declared herself a candidate for 2021 President of the Gambia and
- Jokate Mwegelo, Secretary General Youth Wing of the Tanzanian party CCM – to mention a few.

This rise is backed by an intergenerational movement rallying to open the doors for more women in leadership. The feminist movements have successfully advocated for increased political representation, and women are taking charge. Despite being the first or youngest, these women leaders refuse to confine to the patriarchal norms. Many come from activism, and they deliver in public service with the conviction of opening doors for more women to lead.

They are not only speaking on gender equality but also challenge electoral malpractices, bad governance, corruption and tax hikes. A common trend among young women leaders is to head charities that support and mentor girls because they know first-hand the challenges

“One of the new ways of activism is being your own activist every day and exposing inequality by sharing your story.”

that await in leadership and are ready to overcome generational gatekeeping.

Activism has resulted in multiple progressive bills on the continent. One example is the Affirmative Action (Gender Equality) Act 2024 in Ghana, which is the result of several activists lobbying for over a decade. The law in its current form makes it compulsory to have women either elected or appointed to major decision-making organs of public life. Morocco's new family code Moudawana is another feminist win of the decade. The reform could provide more freedom and protection for women on issues such as child marriage, inheritance, divorce and guardianship.

Progress is visible in women in leadership. According to the IPU Parline Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments (lower or single house), Rwanda leads the statistics with 63.8% and South Africa follows in 16<sup>th</sup> place (44.7%), while Germany ranks 47<sup>th</sup> (35.3%) and the US 74<sup>th</sup> (28.7%). The recent elections of the first female president of Namibia, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah and the first female Vice President of Ghana, Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang are a momentum for more elected roles for women.

### REMEMBERING THE 1995 BEIJING DECLARATION

This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which according to the UN is considered the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights. African women contributed significantly to its creation at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. They demanded an end to gender-based violence and inequality in the workplace. Moreover, they advocated for sexual and reproductive health and for women to occupy leadership positions. One of them was Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, the Secretary-General of the UN World Conference.

While the women's movement gets stronger, there are also growing campaigns against the movement, backlash,



shrinking spaces and a weakening of civil society. Women activists and human-rights defenders in countries like Zimbabwe, Sudan and Uganda continue to face repression and violence for their advocacy work. They often experience intimidation, arrests, physical assaults and even targeted killings. For instance, in Zimbabwe, activist and opposition politician Joana Mamombe was arrested multiple times and tortured for her outspoken political voice.

We see efforts to roll back progressive legislation, limit reproductive rights and undermine women's participation in decision-making processes. One case in point is the attempt to lift the ban on genital mutilation in the Gambia. The country's National Assembly upheld the ban, however.

The feminist movement stands firm to provide a better future for girls. Looking ahead to more feminist wins, a focus on a united front against the backlash would be key. In the late 1990s, feminism was regarded as a bad word and feminists were depicted as nasty, ugly women with a moustache who hated all men. Some of the stereotypes are still maintained but the young feminist movement is bold and unapologetic about "smashing the patriarchy". Young African women simply won't give up their rights – they will fight.

### Links

Feminist coalition Nigeria:  
[feministcoalition2020.com/](https://feministcoalition2020.com/)

UN Women, 2024: Femicides in 2023: Global estimates of intimate partner/family member femicides.  
[unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/11/femicides-in-2023-global-estimates-of-intimate-partner-family-member-femicides](https://unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/11/femicides-in-2023-global-estimates-of-intimate-partner-family-member-femicides)



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## WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

# “Even that red line no longer exists”

*In Afghanistan, the Taliban are systematically banishing women from the public sphere while the world looks on. Human-rights expert Selmin Çalışkan discusses creative activism and international solidarity – and how women in Afghanistan are fighting back.*

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SELMIN ÇALIŞKAN INTERVIEWED BY EVA-MARIA VERFÜRTH

**Ms. Çalışkan, you have advocated for women’s rights for many years and lived in Afghanistan in 2010. What was your experience of the situation there?**

At that time, the Petersberg Agreement of 2001 was in force, which structured the political transition after the fall of the first Taliban regime. There were positive developments for women’s rights, and schools for girls were reopened. These successes encouraged us feminists to throw ourselves into our work. Unfortunately, history is repeating itself and another generation of Afghan women is now facing a Taliban regime – and once again organising underground schools for girls.

**How did the women’s rights movement use that period of new freedoms?**

Under pressure from the United Nations (UN), the first democratic government of Afghanistan had to ratify many international agreements, including CEDAW, the UN women’s rights convention. At least 25% of seats in Parliament now had to be filled by women. Civil-society organisations (NGOs) launched clever campaigns in order to ensure that women’s issues were brought into politics. For example, my colleagues at medica mondiale Afghanistan brought candidates a list of demands that they wanted them to include in their political agendas. In return, the women’s rights activists promised the candidates hundreds of votes from their respective clans. This

idea was later adopted with great enthusiasm by medica mondiale colleagues in Kosovo. It allowed them to skilfully use the prevailing clan structure to promote women’s rights. I first encountered this approach in my own Muslim migrant worker family. Whenever possible, we used social and religious beliefs to fight for our own rights and freedoms.

**A lot changed in Afghanistan during that time. What, specifically, were women’s rights activists able to achieve?**

Legislation to protect women from violence and discrimination was promoted. These initiatives were supported by influential Afghan and international feminists who often worked for large institutions like the UN, the European Union (EU) and national delegations. They built strong alliances. The combined pressure from Afghan and international women’s rights activists led to the passage of a law to fight violence against women in 2009, for example. There were other successes relating to healthcare. Afghanistan’s maternal mortality rate is the second highest in the world. When I started working for medica mondiale in 2003, I was impressed by the Afghan women doctors and former Taliban opponents who went back to Afghanistan with us after the fall of the regime to offer their expertise in hospitals. They taught medical personnel how to recognise gender-specific trauma. Later they built a system to document violations of the human rights of



Photo: picture alliance/abaca/Yaghoobzadeh Alfred/ABACA

On International Women’s Day 2019, Afghan artists painted this graffiti on the wall of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which was dissolved by the Taliban in 2021. The premises are now home to the “Ministry of Praying and Instructing, Promoting Virtue, and Preventing Vice”, which oversees the implementation of Islamic law.

women hospital patients. I used this data to create political pressure and sent it to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women. And still these projects achieved much more than was recorded in the evaluations.

### What exactly do you mean? What else did the international projects achieve?

Working together for women’s rights changed us all: I saw how strong women can be in the most terrible situations and how skilfully they negotiate when faced with hardliners in ministries, families, the military and prisons. They only needed solidarity and support from the outside to exercise their power. The everyday lives of my Afghan colleagues changed too. Thanks to their work for Afghan and international non-governmental organisations, for the UN or the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), they earned their own money and could contribute to household decisions. They drove cars on their own and went on business trips; some studied alongside their work. When their spouses travelled for work, they could sleep at home instead of having to stay with their mothers-in-law. It was difficult for some of our women lawyers to defend clients in court who had been arrested, along with their children, for supposedly committing adultery. The society considered the accused, as well as their defenders, bad people. But attitudes were changing.

### And then international troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

The air went out of women’s lungs on 15 August 2021, the day they were banished once again to hearth and home. Today, when I look back on 20 years of international presence in Afghanistan, I see an international breach of trust with the Afghans. The Enquete Commission’s final report on Germany’s mission in Afghanistan called progress on women’s rights and the establishment of a civil society “partial successes” while declaring the entire Afghanistan mission a failure.

### Since the Taliban took power in 2021, women’s rights have once again been massively restricted. How are women there nevertheless trying to create freedoms for themselves or protest against the situation today?

Nowadays activists are risking their lives to defend themselves against the misogynistic laws of the Taliban. Given the fact that women have been banished from public life and the workforce, it’s good that we now have social media. There women can share demands, provide information about human-rights violations and mobilise support from abroad. Online platforms offer a certain amount of protection. They make it possible, despite access restrictions, to draw international attention to events in Afghanistan and document them in order to someday bring perpetrators

before national courts and the International Court of Justice. Women are also defending themselves against the ignorance of western decision-makers, who were mobilising the military and defending human, women's and girls' rights just a few years ago, but now are silent and looking the other way. During the government negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, education for girls was the only red line the western negotiators, including the Germans, drew. And now even that red line no longer exists.

### **How are aid organisations and activists reacting to this situation?**

In December 2024, the Taliban's latest attempt to restrict the activities of NGOs became public. The UN Security Council discovered that the efforts of more and more Afghan women humanitarian aid workers were being hampered. Yet their work is key for survival in the current humanitarian crisis. The one silver lining is the division within the Taliban regarding the interpretation of Islam. Some reject schooling for girls after age 12 and insist that they stay home, marry and become housewives and mothers. Others would actually let them study, though separately from men. Both groups are basing their views on Islam. Latching onto these contradictions is the only opportunity right now for international aid organisations and local activists to negotiate rights for women and girls.

### **What needs to happen in order for civil society to be able to continue this work?**

For years we have needed more money for feminist movements, more women UN peacekeepers, women and BIPOC diplomats and a serious effort to reduce poverty as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We need more gender mainstreaming and representation of women in the security sector, including in UN peacekeeping missions and the European Union's military and civilian missions. We need penalties for sexualised violence in such missions and a refugee law that protects women and children from gender-based violence. People have been aware of the problem for some time, but institutions have been unwilling to change, and reforms have also faced patriarchal-nationalistic backlash in many countries. The consequences of not fully implementing these goals can be seen in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran.

### **After the death of 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini in police custody in 2022, thousands took to the streets in Iran. From a German perspective, what should have happened differently?**

Despite its professedly feminist foreign policy, the German government has let down Iran's courageous civil society. Germany has said nothing in response to the current wave of executions. The main argument for realpolitik is

“Another generation of Afghan women is now facing a Taliban regime – and once again organising underground schools for girls.”

always economic and security interests – in this case, the much sought-after regional stability. It cannot be achieved, however, while at the same time condoning massive human-rights violations. By providing economic and military support, western countries are giving these governments enormous power over global events and ultimately contributing to instability and armed conflicts, as can be seen in Iran, Syria, Turkey, Israel or Russia.

### **Let's take a look into the future. In 2025, the Beijing Declaration, which promotes equal rights for men and women, will turn 30; UN Resolution 1325, on women, peace and security, will turn 25. How can we use this anniversary year to promote women's rights?**

Particularly in times of anti-democratic policies, we must loudly and clearly demand the political will and the necessary funds for sustainable development, positive peace and gender and climate justice. We have to confront decision-makers with the fact that neither current funding levels nor the condition of the world are adequately supporting women. But we can only overcome polycrises with women's help.



#### **SELMİN ÇALIŞKAN**

is a human-rights expert, strategy consultant and executive coach. Previously, she was the Director of Institutional Relations at the Berlin office of the Open Society Foundations, as well as the Secretary General for Amnesty International Germany. She has also worked for medica mondiale and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), including in Afghanistan.

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Photo: picture alliance / Sipa USA / SOPA Images

Statements such as “The rapist is you” remind men of their responsibility for the injustice done to women worldwide.

MALE ALLIES

# Why men must support feminist activism

*The active participation of men as allies in achieving gender equality is crucial for sustainable and lasting change. Men do indeed have a responsibility to help overcome the deep-rooted disempowerment that stands in the way of gender justice. However, we need to clearly understand what it means to be a male ally, why it is imperative that men support the feminist cause, and how they can best do so.*

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BY STEPHEN MUTIE

Achieving gender equality in Kenya, as elsewhere, is a long and arduous journey that is repeatedly marked by setbacks. And here, as elsewhere, women are at the forefront of this struggle, fighting against all kinds of injustices. At the same time, cases of femicide

and gender-based violence continue to increase, and not only here in Kenya.

In this context, men’s active support of the feminist cause is not only important, but an inherent responsibility. Patri-

archy was created and is maintained by men. By eliminating this oppressive system, not only women but also men free themselves from its constraints. Supporting gender equality is therefore not only a moral imperative but is in our best interests as individuals who want to live in a fair and just society.

It is important to state from the outset that women are not damsels in distress who need rescuing. This means that a male ally is not the long-awaited saviour who will break the yoke of patriarchy and breathe life into the feminist movement.

A male ally is a man who is aware of the oppression that other men perpetrate against women. He is a man who has understood the systemic patriarchal structures that repress women and has made a conscious decision to actively fight gender inequality. Being a male ally means recognising male privilege and understanding the systemic barriers that women face and working to dismantle these structures. Male allies are not only supporters of feminist causes but also agents of change who use their privileged position to amplify women's voices.

### BEYOND THE BYSTANDERS

With deep-rooted patriarchal traditions resisting change, the time for passive spectatorship is over. Men have the

chance to challenge harmful stereotypes of masculinity. Patriarchal societies tend to pay more attention to what men say and do than to women. In fact, those societies devalue women as much as they valorise men. Therefore, male allies should consciously be at the forefront of overcoming traditional notions of dominance and aggression attributed to men.

With the advantage that the structures of patriarchy give them, male allies can work towards making women's voices heard and creating a more inclusive and respectful environment for all genders. They can do this by using their platforms and influence to amplify the voices of women who face particular barriers to being heard. This can be achieved through a variety of means, such as making conscious decisions to respect and share women's perspectives on social media, advocating for women's rights in the workplace and listening carefully to women's experiences. In this way, male allies can also help to ensure that female perspectives are valued and taken into account in decision-making.

Male allies also play a crucial role in combating sexist language and behaviour. This could mean rejecting derogatory jokes or comments, correcting misconceptions about gender roles and advocating for equal treatment in their professional and personal lives. Confronting this

**In the fight for gender equality, it is essential that men actively stand up for women's rights.**

Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Tolga Ildun



sexism is crucial to creating a culture of accountability and respect in both offline and virtual spaces. This also means denouncing harmful acts.

Active participation in feminist causes includes supporting feminist or women-led initiatives, attending rallies and protests, and donating to women's organisations. By contributing time, money and resources, male allies can bolster the impact of feminist efforts.

Moreover, supporting women in leadership positions is essential. Men should advocate for inclusive leadership in all areas of life, from the workplace to politics. This means creating an equal space where all genders can grow according to their skills.

Men's allyship extends to the family sphere as well. This is about sharing household and childcare responsibilities, another important way for men to actively participate in promoting equality. In this way, they relieve the burden on women and show their commitment to a more balanced and fairer family life. Their actions will have a positive impact on the lives of their loved ones.

### UNLEARNING MALE SOCIALISATION

In order to do all these things effectively, however, we as men must first do some groundwork to ensure that these actions are not just symbolic, but are actually done consciously, understandingly and therefore effectively.

- First and foremost, it is about questioning how we have been socialised as men. Indeed, there is a pervasive collective socialisation in patriarchal societies that teaches men to place less value on women. Women are sometimes seen as second-class citizens, subordinate to men. This socialisation has also led to women being demeaned and objectified. Making a conscious effort to unlearn this twisted image of women is crucial for a male ally and an opportunity to understand how patriarchy works, what sustains it, and how best to fight it.
- The second thing that male allies should do is to educate themselves on the various issues that women have been grappling with for ages. This includes an understanding of the concept of "intersectionality", which refers to the intertwining of social categorisations such as ethnicity, class and gender, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. I recommend Bell Hooks' seminal work "Feminist theory: from margin to center" for starters, which offers a compelling vision for a broader push for gender equality and underscores the need to integrate men into the feminist movement. Hooks argues that only by embracing diversity can

feminism develop into a powerful, mass-impact political force capable of effecting substantive social change.

- Thirdly, when men find themselves in feminist spaces or are given a seat at feminist tables, active listening is essential. Men should resist the temptation to think that they can solve the problem and learn to listen carefully to women's experiences without interrupting them or rejecting their point of view.
- This means, fourthly, that men must take women seriously. When women report their experiences of harassment, discrimination or violence, male allies should treat this information with the seriousness it deserves. This is crucial to overcoming the culture of disbelief that often silences women's voices.

**“There is a pervasive collective socialisation in patriarchal societies that teaches men to place less value on women.”**

Finally, it is important to emphasise that there is no need for male allies in feminism because the movement needs men for any supposedly specifically male characteristics. Rather, it must not close itself off to reality: Due to the unbroken presence and strength of patriarchy in many societies, it is, in fact, still exclusively male voices that are heard there by other men. Feminism must take advantage of this and strategically appeal – through male allies – to those who reject change. It is therefore incredibly important what these men say and that they make their voices heard together with women in order to break down harmful patriarchal structures for good.



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## WOMEN IN CONFLICT

# Rebuilding lives in times of crisis

*Women in strife-ridden Cameroon are demanding the chance to set up their lives again despite ongoing conflicts. What matters most is that they are able to earn a secure living. The whole country would benefit from this.*

BY GLEIN NENENG

Since 2016, the so-called Anglophone conflict has severely affected the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, the North West and the South West. The crisis is linked to the independence aspirations of the part of the country that was once a British colony (see Amindeh Blaise Atabong in D+C Digital Monthly 2024/06, p. 8) and has led to massive displacement within and outside the country.

International humanitarian law is not respected by both state forces and non-state armed groups in the Anglophone conflict, leading to endless violence that has so far forced almost 700,000 civilians to flee their homes and disrupted health and education services. The impact on the economies of both regions is immense.

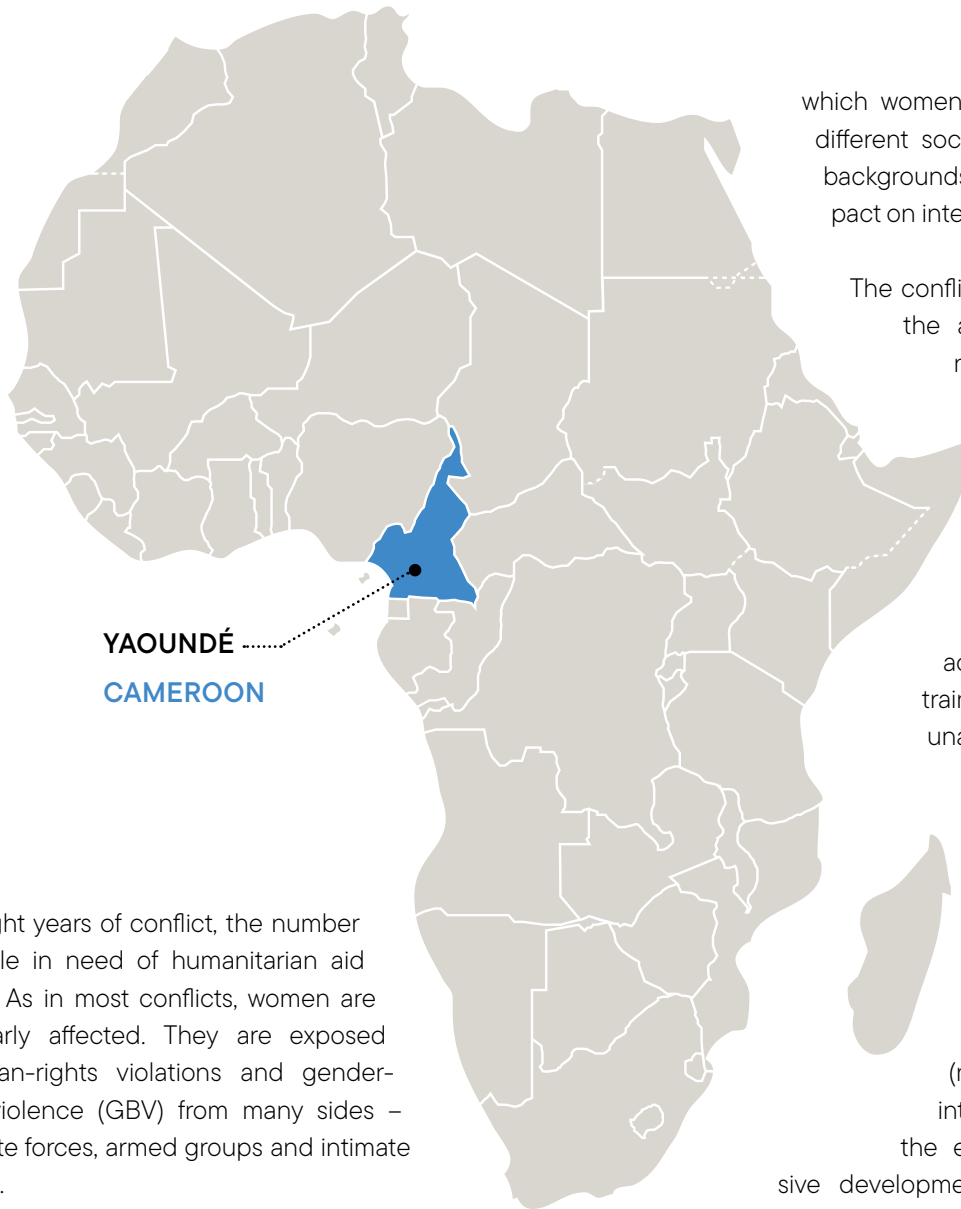
Cameroonians in the diaspora gathered to protest in Rome in 2017 at the start of the Anglophone conflict. The crisis continues to this day.



Photo: picture alliance / Pacific Press / Patrizia Cortellesa



Illustration: AdobeStock.com



After eight years of conflict, the number of people in need of humanitarian aid is huge. As in most conflicts, women are particularly affected. They are exposed to human-rights violations and gender-based violence (GBV) from many sides – from state forces, armed groups and intimate partners.

Women are essential not least for the economic development of the country, but due to the ongoing conflict, they instead work in deplorable conditions and for minimum wages – vulnerable to sexual exploitation, human trafficking and high levels of violence. This is also the case in host communities, where tensions are rising due to limited resources and employment opportunities, and women from Anglophone regions are often marginalised and discriminated against. Displaced returnee women also face challenges in their communities of origin in terms of security, resource mobilisation and reconstruction.

The Anglophone conflict is very complex. There are certain periods, sometimes influenced by certain regional or national holidays, when violence increases sharply. This leads to different patterns of flight and displacement of the affected population. These changing patterns of movement, which sometimes result in people fleeing from one community to another or temporarily returning to their homes, make it even more difficult to ensure the (economic) recovery and integration of women in the different communities. At the same time, the host communities in

which women are stranded have very different social, religious and cultural backgrounds, which also has an impact on integration.

The conflict has severely impacted the already limited opportunities for women to contribute economically to their communities of origin or host communities. While women and girls were already disadvantaged in terms of access to education and training, they are now often unable to go to school at all. Severe trauma caused by the experiences of war further prevents women from engaging in income-generating activities. Without a genuine healing process and the (re)integration of women into the school system and the economy, equality, inclusive development and economic growth

will remain unattainable throughout the country and particularly in the conflict regions.

**WOMEN RAISE THEIR VOICES**

However, Cameroonian women are increasingly raising their voices to criticise the state of humanitarian aid and economic reconstruction efforts and lament the lack of measures for long-term integration and sustainable financial stability. The most visible result of this outcry is the creation of the National Women’s Convention for Peace in Cameroon in 2021 (see Epah Mfortaw Nyukechen in D+C Digital Monthly 2024/03, p. 4). The platform brings together 77 women’s organisations and networks from all ten regions of Cameroon and continues to campaign for peace. The country is facing not only the Anglophone crisis but also ongoing attacks by the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram in the Far North region and is hosting thousands of refugees from the Central African Republic in the east.

Women’s voices have now also drawn attention to the re-design of integration mechanisms and financial-inclusion policies in the two regions affected by the Anglophone

## “Mechanisms must first and foremost improve and strengthen the economic capacities of women affected by conflict so that they can resume their livelihoods.”

conflict. They are calling for better implementation by the government and international development institutions, in particular to strengthen women’s economic power as a first step out of the multiple crises that the conflict has created for them.

So far, it is mainly civil-society organisations that have been addressing the needs of vulnerable groups such as women and children. The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND) are prominent Cameroonian organisations that advocate for women’s issues.

### SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND MARGINALISATION

According to Violet Fokum, Executive Director of CHRDA, one of the main challenges facing conflict-affected and internally displaced women from the South West region is sexual exploitation. The women are forced to use sex work as a means of survival, coerced into it or sexually abused. Marginalisation and discrimination within Cameroonian host communities, where they have no opportunity to participate in livelihood activities, are considerable problems too. “Due to the general scarcity of resources and opportunities, host communities feel threatened by the presence of displaced women,” she says, adding: “If communities cannot learn to welcome each other on the basis of human values, we need policies and mechanisms that connect them.”

CHRDA’s approach is to run long- and short-term empowerment programmes and training sessions to help vulnerable and displaced women acquire skills to start building their livelihoods and economic strength. “We work with other organisations to ensure that these programmes are as comprehensive and effective as possible,” explains Fokum.

In the North West region, the conflict situation has intensified further than in the South West region, and the population is experiencing more and more “ghost town” days. At the beginning of the conflict, “ghost town” days

were introduced every Monday by separatist groups to crush government activities. On these days, both regions are completely sealed off and no economic, social or religious activities take place. In the North West region, these “ghost town” days have become increasingly common and sometimes last for weeks. People who defy them are subjected to kidnapping, extortion, torture and sometimes arbitrary executions.

Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND) is active in the region and focuses on empowering women. Programme Manager Achem Evi Claire emphasises that conflict-affected and displaced women are excluded from almost all areas of life, from access to health services to participation in decision-making processes. COMAGEND is working to reintegrate these women, she says: “We provide information to facilitate reconstruction and integration and resources to empower women in decision-making processes and leadership positions. This is done through capacity building, psychosocial support and political advocacy.”

However, there is some movement at national and international level as well. International organisations and the Cameroonian government are increasingly working together to develop programmes and strategies that ensure and promote the integration of displaced women into new communities or their reintegration into their old ones. Such mechanisms must first and foremost improve and strengthen the economic capacities of women affected by conflict so that they can resume their livelihoods.

Resource mobilisation is critical at all levels. It enables grassroots, regional and national organisations to offer economic empowerment programmes that provide feasible and sustainable solutions to the challenges of women’s economic inclusion in the affected regions. However, it is clear that the Cameroonian government in particular has the most important role to play – in finding ways to achieve lasting peace, in creating inclusive policies and in ensuring gender-equitable development for the entire country.



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## WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

# “If you refuse, he threatens to cut your pay”

*Gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace is still widespread worldwide. In Tanzania, there are several initiatives aimed at empowering female workers. However, there are still challenges, especially in the huge informal sector.*

---

BY KIZITO MAKOYE

**A**isha Shabani sells vegetables at the busy Mchikichini market in Dar es Salaam. The 31-year-old market vendor has learned to navigate Tanzania’s highly competitive informal economy. “You have to use all tactics to win customers,” she says.

But for Shabani and many other women, competition is not the only hurdle. “Men keep touching my breasts or trying to hug me,” she says. “If I didn’t have to earn a living, I would rather give up.”

Her story reflects the reality of many women in Tanzania. According to the World Bank, 40% of all women between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced physical violence, and 17% have suffered sexual violence.

The workplace is one of the spaces where women regularly face GBV. For women like Yustina, a 25-year-old worker in a napkin factory who does not want to reveal her real name, the harassment comes from higher up in the hierarchy. “He acts as if he owns us,” she describes her supervisor, who has repeatedly made sexual overtures. “If you refuse, he threatens to cut your pay or make you work longer hours.”

The challenges in Tanzania mirror a global struggle. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), nearly

one in three women worldwide is affected by violence or harassment in the workplace in her lifetime. Policies such as ILO Convention 190 – a treaty that recognises the right to a violence-free workplace – offer hope, but implementation remains uneven.

In Tanzania, efforts to combat GBV are hampered by deeply rooted cultural norms and weak policy enforcement. There is little access to legal services, especially in rural areas.

For years, most women in formal or informal workplaces have endured harassment in silence because they often lacked the means to fight back. Equality for Growth (EfG), a local women’s rights organisation, recognised this and took action.

“When we started researching, we realised that many women don’t know their rights or how to report abuse,” says Jane Magigita, the founder of EfG. The group launched programmes such as paralegal training, organised women’s associations and ran awareness campaigns to tackle the problem.

## UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

While efforts to combat harassment in the workplace are gaining momentum, the informal sector poses a particular



**Market vendor in Tanzania: Women in the informal sector are particularly affected by sexual harassment at work.**

challenge. Due to the lack of formal structures, it is still difficult to implement measures. However, innovative models are emerging.

In 2023, EfG introduced a legal and economic empowerment manual tailored to women in the informal sector. The handbook addresses legal rights, licensing and economic principles and provides especially market traders with the knowledge to advocate for themselves.

EfG also set up mobile legal advice clinics in markets, offering free weekly consultations. According to the organisation, these clinics have counselled more than 7000 women, resolved legal issues and provided a sense of empowerment.

Agatha Mmasi, another food vendor at the Mchikichini market, describes how the EfG training has changed interactions. “Men used to refuse to pay for food and drinks, but now we threaten to report them. That has changed their behaviour.”

Under the slogan “Mpe riziki, si matusi” (“Give us chances, not insults”), EfG has run campaigns that have visibly

changed norms. Market committees now impose fines for verbal abuse, creating a safer environment for women traders.

Said Wamba, acting Secretary General of the Trade Union Congress of Tanzania (TUCTA), calls for more initiatives such as EfG and enhanced policy measures to ensure the protection of women and vulnerable workers. “GBV in the workplace is a hidden crisis. Many women suffer in silence because they fear stigmatisation or losing their jobs if they talk about it,” he says. “We need to break this cycle by creating safe reporting channels and holding perpetrators accountable.”

Wamba stresses the need for employers to implement gender-sensitive policies and training programmes. “Women should be able to work with dignity. Employers should take their responsibilities seriously and create an environment that is free from harassment and intimidation,” he demands.

He acknowledges the steps taken recently, including advocacy campaigns and the implementation of the Employment and Labour Relations Act. It came into force

“Men used to refuse to pay for food and drinks, but now we threaten to report them.”

in 2006 and has been amended several times to guarantee basic workers' rights, establish basic employment standards and regulate the prevention and settlement of disputes. “There are initiatives to raise awareness and ensure that labour inspectors handle cases of abuse in the workplace,” he says. “But enforcing existing regulations remains a challenge. We need to deliver swift justice to victims and toughen penalties for perpetrators.”

### THE CLIMATE CRISIS INCREASES VULNERABILITY

TUCTA is currently examining how informal workers can be unionised and how collective platforms for advocacy can be created. “In Tanzania, climate pressures are increasingly destabilising incomes. This means that many women have no choice but to continue working informally, probably even longer or more days per week. They need a safety net – not only to survive, but also to maintain their dignity,” says Wamba.

Organisations such as the Tanzanian Women Lawyers Association (TAWLA) and the Association of Tanzanian Employers (ATE) are also pushing for change. Suzanne Ndomba-Doran, ATE executive director and member of the TAWLA, emphasises the need for solid reporting mechanisms and legal protection. “We encourage women to come forward, but we are also aware of the risks they face in doing so,” she says.

According to her, ATE has launched campaigns to educate employers about GBV and their legal obligations. “Change starts with awareness, but action must follow,” she says.



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