THE POLITICS OF SISTERHOOD:
A FEMINIST APPROACH TO AGENCY AND YOUTH IN PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN URBAN UGANDA

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Acronyms

AMwA	Akina Mama wa Afrika
AWDF	African Women's Development Fund
IM	Instant Messaging
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

Abstract

This study explores the foundations of young women's agency in processes of social change in urban Uganda. Through the lens of the concept of 'sisterhood,' this research examines the strategies, struggles, and successes of young feminists challenging systemic inequality and advancing women's rights in the country. It follows the trajectory of the women's movement in the country and the trends of African feminist theorisation and organising across the continent. This investigation was carried out in Kampala over three months, especially in the headquarters of Akina Mama wa Afrika, a Pan-Africanist, feminist organisation. From the personal to the collective, this quest brings to the forefront the experiences and views of young Ugandan women who are involved in the feminist movement. It is argued that the idea and practice of sisterhood, understood as political solidarity amongst women, enhance their capacity to promote social transformation in Uganda. Addressing the different manifestations of this idea in context, this research analyses the role of social media and the feminist discourse facilitating this endeavour. While navigating through alternative ways of generating change, this journey explores the complexities of agency and structure in urban Africa in the 21st century, and contributes to the study of the contemporary wave of feminism in the continent.

Key words: African feminism, sisterhood, political agency, social media, feminist discourse.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Figure 1. Street view of the outskirts of Kampala. 24th January, 2020.

Rationale and research questions

This dissertation aims to explore the foundations of young women's agency in the processes of social change in urban Uganda. Through the lens of the feminist concept of 'sisterhood', this research examines the strategies, struggles, and successes of young feminists challenging systemic inequality and advancing women's rights in the country. In combination with the master's internship, this research was carried out in Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), a Pan-Africanist, feminist, leadership-development organisation established in Kampala. Thus, it is located within the study of the women's movements in the region, as well as the theoretical and social framework of African feminism.

The idea of this quest emerged from a personal interest in unveiling the role of women in processes of social transformation and countering male-dominant narratives of power. I realised that such intersecting topics had rarely been approached from a feminist perspective in the field of African studies, coming across with somewhat limited literature on the Eastern African region. Nevertheless, the tradition of placing questions about agency in women and gender studies encouraged me to take this approach. Researchers in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, and philosophy have long proved the value of adopting such a dialectical approach to understand the capacity of

humans to transform social structures while being partly shaped by them. Not only do I consider this approach pertinent to understanding the trajectory of women in social movements but also to examine their capacity to thrive in patriarchal societies in the face of context-specific duress. In this sense, this research brings to the forefront the experiences and views of young Ugandan women who are personally and professionally devoted to these efforts in the country. I chose the method of critical ethnography to explore the internal and social worlds of such participants in both virtual and physical spaces.

Thus, I immersed myself as a researcher in the office, as well as in online and offline events, observing and engaging in conversations, undertaking interviews, and collecting data from written sources. Intrigued by the striking presence of the idea of 'sisterhood' in these exchanges, I decided to explore the meaning and relevance young feminists attached to it. In the process, I encountered a myriad of representations, practices, and contexts through which this idea became meaningful at both individual and collective levels. Then, I decided to focus on the elements of solidarity, community, and collective action embedded in the definition, and examine its impacts on the political agency of women. While the idea of sisterhood is developed along the dissertation, I take the definition of political agency provided by Anne Kaun, Maria Kyriakidou and Julie Uldam in their work of 'Political Agency in the Digital Age: Media, Participation and Democracy' (2016) published on the journal *Media and Communication.* The researchers refer to this concept as the capacity to act 'on political, economic and social structures in order to promote social change' by making 'use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts' to transform 'the structures within which it is embedded (…) in creative and often radical ways' (p.1). From this approach emerges the main question guiding this research: *Why does the idea and practice of 'sisterhood' enhance the individual and collective political agency of young feminist women in urban Uganda?*

However, in the first days of fieldwork, I quickly realised that I would not be able to fully answer these questions unless I incorporated the online world as a field of research. In effect, the presence of the Internet and social media was almost unavoidable in daily life at the office: It was present in lunchtime conversations, events, personal stories, or even at the core of relationships. Drawn from this assessment is the second cross-cutting question of this research: *How are young feminists employing social media in their practice of feminism and sisterhood?*

Furthermore, one of the most striking features of the interactions on WhatsApp and Twitter was the language of sisterhood, which seemed a powerful tool to awaken specific dynamics amongst feminists. These early observations followed the perspective of critical analysts, who consider the discourse as a generative mechanism of social reality. In this regard, I find especially appropriate Phillips and Hardy's (2002) approach to this concept as 'produced and made real through discourses' that 'cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning' (p.3). Therefore, the question of *Why is the discourse of sisterhood relevant in such processes?* responds to the need to explore the aims and effects this language on those who employ it. Finally, the adoption of an agency approach requires to examine this phenomenon in relation to the structures that frame it. This research emphasises two different levels of analysis: The feminist movement and the context of the country in socio-political and cultural terms. How young

women shape and are shaped by these interwoven environments will be reflected in the thesis.

Outline of the study: The journey

I could not think of a better way to present this study other than to give a direct account of my experiencein the field. From the questions above, I have identified four main elements that influence the political agency of young feminist women: sisterhood, social media, feminist discourse, and context. These elements become the main characters of the story of this research, connected through the experience and views of the participants. However, these cannot be understood without referring to the historical context of the social movement in Uganda, or the ideology and the social movement of African feminism that frames their efforts. A brief introduction to this context is the aim of the second chapter. In the third chapter, I elaborate on the methodological considerations underpinning this research. After addressing the methods and approaches applied in the processes of data collection and analysis, I dive into the process of reflexivity triggered by the experience of fieldwork. Finally, I share some thoughts about the role of the collaborators of this study.

The next chapter opens the door to the empirical section of the dissertation, where the four main elements are addressed in relation to the central topic of political agency. As such, the following chapters are guided by specific sub-questions that help the academic elaboration in each of them. Through the experience of two young women, the fourth chapter explores the connections between their individual experience of solidarity and their engagement with feminism and sisterhood. In the fifth chapter, I continue the journey with these young women to elaborate on the concept of sisterhood throughout their experience and support it with theoretical and field-based approaches. This section aims to explore the political transformation of the ideas of solidarity and community through the feminist discourse, and the effects on young women's identity and purposes. The sixth chapter analyses the idea of sisterhood in practice, with a focus on the dynamics taking place within close networks of feminists. In this case, I analyse the role, the construction, and the relevance of sisterhood as an alternative support system in practical and emotional terms. The seventh chapter invites us to approach sisterhood from a perspective that places activism at the centre, which translates into a primary response mechanism in practice. Through the case study of #FreeSheena, I examine an external dimension of solidarity and collective action exercised towards women who are particularly affected by violence and injustice in the country. Finally, I give closure to the dissertation with some concluding thoughts.

Chapter 2. In context: The Ugandan feminist movement

Figure 2. Woman street vendor reading in the Parliament of Uganda. 20th January, 2020.

Understanding the actions and concerns of feminists in the country requires an introduction to the broader context within which they take place. This chapter begins with a historical overview of the women's movement in Uganda, followed by an introduction to the African feminist thought that frames the movement ideologically. Finally, I discuss the main features of feminist organising across the continent to focus on the trends in Uganda.

Women's movement in Uganda

Acknowledging the legacy of women organising in pre-colonial and colonial times (see Tamale 1999), most scholars trace the roots of the women's movement back to the process of independence culminating in 1962. In her work 'The Situation of the Women's Movement in Uganda,' the renowned women's rights expert Florence Butegwa explains that the first female politicians not only contributed to this process but also promoted full political participation and voting rights for women (Butwega, 2019). However, this level of activism saw a dramatic decrease in the following decades, when the succeeding authoritarian regimes allowed little, if any, autonomy for organising. The revitalisation of the movement in the mid-1980s was marked by two key events: the UN Nairobi Conference on Women (1985) and the new policy environment of the post-war period. Bringing to an end the so-called United Nations Decade for Women, the Third World Conference brought together numerous voices denouncing the inequality women and girls face across the globe (Tripp 2003). Especially inspiring for Ugandan attendees were the vitality and experience shown by their African counterparts, who had brought an agenda of 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' to their countries (Butegwa 2019). These winds of change coincided with a new, national context brought by the end of the civil war, also called the Bush War (1980-86) headed by Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. In response to women's role in the victory, the new government of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) enacted policies promoting their freedom of association and participation in the public sphere. This political gesture might explain the initial positive reception of women of the new government's suspension of multiparty politics (Guma 2017).

Consequently, the last decades of the 21st century saw the spectacular resurgence of women's organisations advocating for their rights and liberties amid the socioeconomic and political despair of the country. Aili M. Tripp, one of the most renowned scholars in the field, analysed in her book *Women and politics in Uganda* how the women's movement had become 'the largest organised group within society,' and 'one of the strongest women's movements in Africa' by the mid-1990s (2000, 23-25). Figures such as Miria Matembe represent this process in the political sphere, where the high participation of women at local and national bodies was crucial for ensuring legal protection of women's rights. Similarly, women invested efforts in building a broad, progressive civil society that could give visibility to these concerns. In effect, in terms of membership, the movement became highly heterogeneous and inclusive, gathering women from diverse economic, educational, religious, and ethnic backgrounds (Tripp 2003). This process of movement-building would culminate with the drafting process of the 1995 Constitution. Women's organisations engaged in joint action to raise awareness and foster country-wide participation of women in the process. Their contribution became crucial for the adoption of a progressive legal framework that guaranteed women's rights to 'equality, freedom and security of the person, freedom from violence (…) and the right to security and control over one's own body' (Guma 2017). In addition, 'affirmative action' policies were established to facilitate their access to higher education and decision-making spaces (UFF 2008). At the same time, activists such as Hilda Tadria would contribute to the expansion of the movement across the continent with the creation of Pan-Africanist networks, such as the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF). It is in this context that Akina Mama wa Afrika transferred its headquarters to Uganda, constituting one of the few organisations that publicly

identified as 'feminist' (Akina Mama wa Afrika 2018). Last but not least, the academy became another critical player of the movement. Feminist scholars such as Sylvia Tamale and Stella Nyanzi took a step forward to open the debate around contested issues, including power, politics, and sex (Guma 2017, 20).

Figure 3. Miria Matembe speaking in The Women in Leadership Symposyum organised by AMwA. 12th February 2020.

Nevertheless, the political shift of the country in the early 2000s would evidence the lack of the rulers' genuine interest in these advancements. While women had proved instrumental for the NRM political legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s, the instauration of multiparty politics in 2005 seemed to change their strategic agenda (Guma 2017). This reality came hand in hand with new economic and social challenges brought by increasing levels of globalisation, militarisation, and neofundamentalisms (UFF 2008). The resulting relocation of resources and shrinking civic space deepened the movement's fragmentation, limiting its capacity to act and protect previous gains. The Ugandan feminist scholar Josephine Ahikire, quoted by Butwega, defined the situation as follows: 'On the one hand, women have made inroads into important political and policymaking spaces, whereas on the other hand they are seen to have decreasing levels of autonomy and influence over the promotion of women's rights' (2019, 20).

The articulation of the Ugandan feminist movement results from the efforts to reverse this trend. Following a number of national and continental processes culminating in the 2006 African Feminist Forum, a group of Ugandan advocacy leaders took a step forward to reaffirm their commitment to fighting for women's rights from a feminist standpoint (UFF 2008). Relevant figures such as Sylvia Tamale, Hope Chigudu and Sarah Mukasa joined efforts to gather feminists from the civil society, the public and the private sectors, and the academy to constitute the Ugandan Feminist Forum. The disavowal of the broader

women's movement around the 'F-word' led these women to create a separate space where they could collectively reaffirm themselves and strategize the way forward (UFF 2008). Despite the low numbers of self-identified 'feminists' in the country, it seems that their connection with others theorising and organising across the continent is pushing their capacity to act in new, creative ways. In the following sections, I examine the ideological and social pillars that sustain these efforts at national and regional levels.

Contemporary African Feminism: Building the theory

The departure point of contemporary African feminist thought can be traced back to the 1980s, when Global South scholars and activists committed to bringing to the forefront the standpoint of women living in post-colonial contexts. As First and Third World feminists began to debate in UN conferences, the need to unveil the effects of geopolitical inequalities on women's lives became evident. In her study of women's movements in the Global South, Jeniffer L. Disney stressed the aims of deconstruction of the Western discourse and construction of 'feminisms grounded in the histories, cultures, and experiences of women from the Third World' (2008, 27). In effect, the early 1990s saw the spectacular growth of literature and scholars analysing these processes (Ahikire 2014).

In this sense, numerous scholars link the heterogeneous roots of African feminism to a history of colonial and post-colonial struggles and encounters with other narratives, such as the Western. The Nigerian scholars Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi represent the latter trend, questioning the applicability of Western theories to explain African realities. Both argue that Western colonisation presupposed the category of gender as the principal, universal organising principle of any society; an assumption that disrupted previous local systems of social organisation and mounted the burden for women in the continent. Making use of her analysis of Yorubaland society, Oyèwùmi (2003) illustrates how other power relations based on categories such as seniority or lineage could better explain the social fabric of certain societies in the continent. Similarly, Amadiume analysed such power structures to shed light on the fluidity of gender in pre-colonial societies (1987). Both criticise the imposition of gender discourse, which depicts the 'woman' as an essentialised, and fixed category universally subordinated to 'men'. Such perceived over-focus on women subordination and male privilege may partially explain the rejection of many women who, both in academia and civil society, do not see themselves represented by a 'foreign', 'radical' discourse focused on 'fighting battles against men' (Atanga 2013, 303). In this line, earlier scholars such as Gwendolyn Mikell offered a comparison of these trends in Africa and the West:

> 'The African variant of Feminism grows out of a history of a female integration within largely corporate and agrarian-based societies with strong cultural heritages that have experienced traumatic colonisation by the West (…) Western women were emphasising individual female autonomy, while African women have been emphasising culturally linked forms of public participation (…) The slowly emerging African Feminism is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many "bread, butter, culture, and power" issues.' (4, 1997).

Such statements have been interpreted in a myriad of ways. Disney translates her description into terms of 'practical (bread and butter) gender needs and strategic (culture and power) gender interests' (2008, 30). On the contrary, the Ugandan scholar Josephine

Ahikire considered that Mikell's 'essentialising' and 'conservative' perspective robs the critical aspects of the scholarship and activism of the continent, which pursue 'more audacious and radical agendas, especially in the fraught arenas of sexuality, culture and religion' (2014, 8). These opposing views reflect the controversy about what 'African feminism,' or rather 'feminisms' are; a debate that also permeates identity and movement-building concerns. The celebration of the African Feminist Forum constituted an attempt to dissipate these doubts. Beyond the aim of revitalising the cause across the continent, this convening pursued to tackle such a lack of theoretical clarity and 'connect the practice of activism to our theoretical understanding of African feminism' (AFF 2006, 13). Inspired by such an event, Ahikire draws a definition of African Feminism in its pluralism and diversity, emphasising its simultaneous 'philosophical, experiential, and practical' nature.

> 'Feminism is a myriad of various theoretical perspectives emanating from the complexities and specifics of the different material conditions and identities of women, and informed by the many diverse and creative ways in which we contest power in our private and public lives (…) At the same time, it is possible—and strategically necessary—to re-conceptualise "African feminism" as an ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds. The point of departure here is that the feminist struggle on the African continent represents a critical stance against the mainstream of patriarchal power' (2014, 8-9)

In effect, this point of departure is generating new platforms of knowledge-creation and dissemination. Academic journals such as *Feminist Africa* are now sharing their space with youth-led digital initiatives such as *African feminism* or *The Wide Margin*. Similarly, new spaces are being created to discuss and promote movement-building efforts across the continent, addressed in the next section.

Contemporary African Feminism: Building a movement

In the 22nd edition of the journal *Feminist Africa,* Charmaine Pereira (2017) provides an overview of the trajectory and latest developments of the movement on the continent. In this last part, I follow her reflections to shed light on the processes of feminist organising on both the continent and the country.

In terms of agenda, the author begins by emphasising the continuous presence of cross-cutting concerns around Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). Efforts from both academia and civil society organisations have been essential for raising awareness and achieving legal protection. In the case of Uganda, the Domestic Violence Act and the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilations Act (2010) were enacted. These were complemented by the latest amendment of the Penal Code (Sexual Offences) Act, which broadens the meaning of 'consent' and extends the sentence of rape to life imprisonment (Butwega 2019). Most recently, cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence in institutions of higher learning have triggered mobilisations and long-lasting discussions beyond borders. It is noteworthy the interest and engagement of young activists in the field, as the so-called #MeToo movements in the continent illustrate (Kagumire 2019).

The emergence of these movements also invites us to consider one of the most notorious features of feminism in the continent: The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the Internet. Far from being a feature of Africans alone, the Internet and social media have become an increasingly important space and tool for feminist discussion and activism around the globe. The writer Munro (2013) reflects on how these tools have generated a 'call-out' culture in which sexism and misogyny can be challenged. Indeed, face-to-face activism is nowadays accompanied by the use of the Internet to mobilise and access to multiple kinds of voices and resources at unprecedented speed and scale. Despite the limits in the access, it is undeniable that 'e-technology shapes new ways of being and doing, generating change through new forms of connection (online), space (cyberspace) and reality (virtual)' in the continent (Pereira 2017, 21). How this connectivity is influencing feminist activism and organising in Uganda underpins the analysis of this research, as illustrated in the next chapters.

It is through new technologies that we arrive at the actors who have popularised its use: the young African feminists. According to Pereira, the emergence of such a generation is one of the most striking features of contemporary feminism, a generation whose trajectory distances them from academia and nurtures from the Internet. The introduction of feminism into popular culture has also played a significant role in facilitating younger women's forms of creativity and self-expression, combined with feminist concerns and activism. To my pleasant surprise, the author recognises the relevance of Akina Mama wa Afrika and its African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) nurturing the movement and 'shaping feminist consciousness among younger activists' (2017, 22). The writer Minna Salami has even categorised young women's activism across the continent as a new 'millennial or 4th Wave of African Feminism', which complements post-colonial and contemporary feminist strands since the 2000s (Dieng 2020). How this new generation is using social media to exert their political agency and organise as a movement in Uganda constitutes one of the points of focus of this research.

Beyond the use of social media, this new generation has also revitalised the notion of 'intersectionality' in the continent. This idea cannot be considered a new element to the African feminist thought, born out of the claim that context-dependent social structures engender specific, intersecting forms of oppression. Examples such as the South African #RhodesMustFall movement in 2015 evidenced the need to expand its traditional scope. Not only did university protesters focus on the persistent racism and exclusion faced by Black people but also shed light on the duress faced by Black feminists and Black queers, in particular (Ramaru 2017). The identification of these South African students as 'radical, intersectional African feminists' called for a renewed awareness on the effects of sexual and heterosexual dimensions of oppression (Pereira 2017). In the case of Uganda, we can see increasing efforts from younger activists especially to include and amplify the concerns of sex workers, LGBT women, and those affected by HIV/AIDS (Butwega 2019, 23).

In terms of transnational action, it seems that this new connectivity has strengthened Pan-Africanist networks but also spurred the creation of new ones. Since 2006, their efforts around advocacy, training and, knowledge have come to be framed by the Charter of Feminist Principles adopted by the African Feminist Forum (AFF). The creation of this

continental platform responded to the need to join efforts 'to propel the movement forward in the face of increasingly reactionary and hostile responses' (AFF 2006, 2), a reality that affected feminists in Uganda and across the continent. Therefore, it became paramount to 'create an autonomous space for African feminists (…); to agree on a charter of principles for feminist organising in Africa; to produce a body of feminist knowledge; and to engage with other social movements' (2006, 2). National feminist forums were subsequently created, such as the Ugandan Feminist Forum, to share and advance these concerns at the country level. To these goals, one must add the deliberate effort to mentor and integrate young feminists 'in a non-matronising manner' (AFF 2006) and bridge the existing gap between generations, especially noteworthy in the use of social media and discussions around sex work or LGBT rights (Pereira 2017, 22). Signed by more than 100 activists in Accra, the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists stands today as a landmark document that expresses a set of principles to be upheld and the commitment to a collective feminist identity without reservations (AFF 2006).

It is around these concerns of shared identity and movement-building that the idea of sisterhood comes to the table. In the executive summary of the 1st African feminist Forum, we see how 'understanding sisterhood and building solidarity' stands as one of the goals of the convening (AFF 2006). To further evidence, the Charter envisages a movement sustained by a 'spirit of feminist solidarity and mutual respect based on frank, honest and open discussion of differences'. Similarly, it reaffirms the commitment to 'support, nurture, and care of other African feminists, along with the care for our own well-being' at the core of feminists' individual principles (AFF 2006). Far from being short-lived concerns, the Ugandan Feminist Forum hosted in 2018 a convening aimed at promoting collective action and 'intergenerational knowledge sharing and cultivating self-love, inclusivity, solidarity, and commitment among Sisters'. In this context, this research aims to go beyond the narrative and comprehend the effects of these ideas on the lives of young feminists.

Chapter 3. Methodology and fieldwork

Figure 3. Interviewing Noella Kabale, former participant of AMwA's leadership programmes. 24th January, 2020.

In this chapter, the reader is guided through the particularities of the fieldwork that gave rise to this research and reshaped the questions to be answered. Firstly, I introduce the methodology and methods applied in the processes of data collection and analysis. Secondly, I address the process of reflexivity I went through in the hope of illustrating how my presence and choices influenced the process. Finally, I share some thoughts about the role of collaborators in the study.

Methodology, methods, and field site

Reflecting upon methodology requires going a few months back. This topic emerged from a personal interest in discovering the role of women in processes of social change. My aim was to identify the gains but also the struggles of these women in context, incorporating political, sociological, and anthropological concerns. To achieve this purpose, I appreciate the value of qualitative methodology, which allows the researcher to document women's lives in a way that their experiences can come through (Brymon 2012, 454). Furthermore, I followed feminist scholars' preference for this approach, who consider it the most suitable to sensitively comprehend the social world from the perspectives of participants (2012, 380). These considerations already betray the interpretivist epistemology that underpinned this research, whose aim is to illustrate the social reality as it is constructed by participants. At the same time, the experience of fieldwork in Uganda took me towards critical realism perspectives. I realized that, in this case, the social worlds of participants needed to be understood in relation with the ideology that gave them meaning. Then, the choice of critical ethnography and discourse analysis flowed from this process naturally. Both approaches allowed me as a researcher to learn 'a valuable lesson about power and knowledge construction from participants, who become (to some degree) co-researchers, schooling the researcher in their culture, practices' (Ellingson 2017, 5). In the case of the former, the choice was supported by the views of women's rights expert Florence Butwega, who recognises the need to appreciate the lived experiences of 'oppression, marginalization, and exclusion' to understand their mobilisation for change (2019, 6). The use of the latter was motivated by my learning of how 'social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, 3). To do so, a combination of ethnographic methods looked the most appropriate option for collecting the data. According to Brymon, these allow the researcher to immerse him- or herself in a specific social setting for a certain period of time, observing and engaging in conversations with participants, undertaking interviews and collecting documents deemed relevant for the investigation (2012, 432).

That is exactly what my fieldwork consisted of in Kampala, Uganda, at Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA). Founded in 1985 by African women in the United Kingdom, this pan-Africanist, feminist leadership-development organisation aims to reinforce 'the individual and collective leadership of African women, forming strategic partnerships, to tackle patriarchy and attain gender equality and women's empowerment for a just and secure Africa' (AMwA, 2020). It is within this framework that I established relationships with young women engaged in these efforts. During the three months of internship, I supported their tasks at the organisation while gathering data through participant observation in conversations and events. In turn, they willingly contributed to this research with their experiences and views, as we will see later. Furthermore, I was provided access to the feminist and women's movements in the country. The organisation itself constitutes one of its most active networking spaces, convening women from different backgrounds and sectors of society. To capture this diversity, I engaged with participant observation and informal conversations, which combined with a written account of events and assumptions. Similarly, I undertook and transcribed audio and/or

video-recorded interviews, also on WhatsApp, that could directly capture my collaborators' opinions and experiences. While some were semi-structured, most conversations were relatively unstructured, guided by a list of issues to be addressed. The later conversations, however, were rather aimed at supporting or challenging ideas emerging from previous encounters and observations.

Furthermore, I soon realized that I would not be able to fully understand my collaborators' social worlds unless I incorporated the virtual space as a field of research. In my first days, I observed a persistent presence of the Internet and social media in their daily lives at the organisation. In fact, I was quickly introduced to numerous WhatsApp groups composed of activists who had participated in the African Women Leadership Institute (AWLI). My presence at Akina Mama granted me unexpected, direct access to these groups where 'alumnae' maintained contact with their peers after the leadership training. Scrolling down my phone screen, I started to observe significant activity with which my colleagues engaged and included references to sisterhood. Intrigued by possible meanings and practices around this term online, I decided to carry out virtual ethnography through participant observation in one of the groups. This choice was motivated by the presence of my closest collaborators, Sue and Patricia, as 'alumnae' in the group. I followed the same patterns employed in an offline setting: I took notes about the conversations, topics, attitudes, and language employed.

However, WhatsApp would not be the only platform used for collaborators' connecting with each other. Twitter was everywhere. Just writing down some of my observations at the office, I realized how present this platform was in lunchtime conversations, events, personal stories, or even at the core of relationships. Sue's surprise at my barely-touched account would finally trigger my decision to add this virtual world as a field site. Keeping my focus of analysis, I reactivated this account to engage with participant observation and start following my collaborators' interactions on this platform. These observations were aimed at exploring the connections between their virtual and offline realities, and how they complement each other within their lives as feminists (Hine 2011, 2). I followed the networked approach to virtual ethnography proposed by Green, Harvey, and Knox (2005) quoted by Hine, who argues its adequacy 'to explore the ways in which sites are created and made meaningful, and the practices which sustain networking as a meaningful thing to do in particular settings' (2011, 13). The unexpected event of #FreeSheena would give a new meaning to this approach, incorporating the notion of sisterhood as activism. The jailing of a young woman provoked by her Twitter posts on stories of sexual abuse in Kampala triggered a whole online response from young women, activists, and feminists. While participating in both offline and online efforts, I actively observed and wrote how things evolved in both social spaces. This method allowed me to explore through my own experience, and that of my collaborators, the potential of online platforms to organise and engage with solidarity and collective action.

Figure 4. *Selfie* in the office at lunchtime with Rebecca Achom – sitting next to me - and Patricia Humura – taking the picture. 14th January 2020.

Critical approaches and reflexivity: My experience

It was during my experience of fieldwork that I started to appreciate the need to adopt a critical perspective in the use of these methods. It became clear that exploring the complexity of individuals in context required a critical examination of my own presence as a researcher. These considerations follow the trends of contemporary ethnography, which aim to overcome the subject-object split to engage with an intersubjective mode of knowing (Jackson 1999). In this regard, post-modern scholars highlight the need to give room to the 'personal narrative as a mode of expressing findings from the field' (Roberts and Sanders 2005, 295). I followed their proposal of taking the path of reflexivity to engage with these efforts successfully, especially during the fieldwork. This approach is based on the belief that the researcher's own background, assumptions, and emotions play an important role in the development of research, a role that can be effectively analysed through the exercise of reflexivity (Bolton 2009). In effect, I believe in the importance of acknowledging and sharing this process to make both the researcher and audience aware of the weaknesses and strengths of this study. In this section, I try to illustrate these concerns in relation to the personal and theoretical choices driving the findings of this study.

Perhaps a natural factor to consider first is the ideological baggage that pushed me to embark on this quest. In the fieldwork, being a feminist became both a bridge and a bias. In the case of the former, it proved to be the key entry point to Akina Mama wa Afrika as

the field site of this research. My position as an intern supporting the work of the organisation positioned me as a learner, while my unhidden role as a researcher allowed me to be an observer. I would dare to say that sharing a feminist ideology laid a kind of complicity that facilitated interaction and potential 'allyship' with my collaborators. The theoretical ground we shared about specific points became essential to start grasping the way my colleagues saw the world and their role in it. However, by making this appreciation, I do not mean to imply that our feminist approaches were the same, especially considering the aim of African feminists of countering white feminists' homogenising assumptions. Still, there was a certain affinity that drove me in the first weeks to engage enthusiastically with the organisation's activities and the narrative that underlined it. Funnily enough, one of my closest collaborators suggested that I find more time for my research amongst my internship tasks. It was then when I realised the need to keep a certain distance and engage with the study from a critical approach. The acknowledgment of my position as a 'foreign, white, heterosexual, Western middle-class feminist woman' became an important aspect in this regard. Reading and listening about intersectionality in the field helped me to become aware of this positionality, immersing myself in a process of critical examination of my personal drivers and assumptions. Similarly, I noticed how important it was to consider the impacts of my presence in the interactions with the others. I remember one of my collaborators pointing out how difficult it was for foreigners to understand the implications of the political atmosphere for activists in Uganda. This kind of comment gave me the impression of how difficult it was to make these perceptions fade away before their eyes. Still, I must also admit that these differences would eventually smooth with some of my closest collaborators. These shifting experiences nurtured the need to consider intersubjectivity as part of the process, understood as the critical examination of the interaction between researcher and participants (Anderson 2012).

However, there are still numerous elements behind what story is told, why, and how. The context of the office was clearly one of those. It became easier to understand each other's stories and concerns eating some matooke in a local place or walking down the street from the church. Similarly, social expectations were something to take into consideration. I was sometimes hesitant about whether I should explain the aims and details of the research, fearing that they would shape their answers to match my assumptions. Yet, I considered necessary letting participants know the purpose of it and be aware of what they were contributing to. An illustrative example of both factors was one of the last conversations I had with Patricia. We had been debating on my living room couch for a while when her opinion started challenging some of the ideas I had developed so far. From my initial shock, I posed her questions to still make sense of my (disrupted) schemes from her viewpoint. It was only later that I realized how dear I was holding my assumptions. I was left with the impression that she had felt compelled to shape her initial answers to match my expectations. However, it was precisely her 'deviating' view what pushed me to understand the importance of analysing the relationship between discourse and reality.

These are the moments that not only awoke my interest in intersubjectivity but also stressed the need to approach my experience from a critical approach, inviting me to

position myself as a character of this story. In doing so, I identify my subjectivity as part of the process to shed light on how our 'unique selves (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, particular life experiences) shaped and were shaped by the journey' (Ellingson 2017, 4). The shaping of the research topic offers a concluding example. I decided to focus on the analysis of sisterhood when the references to it became almost impossible to avoid. It was present in the testimonies of the 'alumnae,' in official movement-building documents, in conversations at the office, in Tweets and WhatsApp groups. I was further motivated when I was told that it was quite imaginative to analyse the feminist movement through such a lens. I had the impression that this study could arouse interest around an idea of solidarity that seemed to have been long present and unquestioned around activists in Uganda. From the different possibilities of 'sisterhood,' I chose to finally investigate this idea from the perspectives of young feminists whose ideas and practices influence and are influenced by the networks they conform. It is the aim of this research to join these considerations to offer a unique, and at the same time, representative analysis of how the social construction of 'sisterhood' impacts activism and collective association in Uganda.

More than story characters: Sue

I could not give closure to this chapter without referring to the role of Sue in the process. From the pages of this thesis, you will observe that the experience of this collaborator is present in all empirical chapters. The choice to channel the development of the academic argument through her story comes motivated by this experience in the field. Whether it was the physical proximity at the office, our young age, or just mere coincidence, the truth is that I felt a particular affinity developing between both of us during my stay. I was further impressed by her perseverance, which reflected an engagement with feminism that went beyond work-related matters. I was intrigued to know more about it. It was in the day-to-day interactions at lunchtime or at the desk in the office that I realised that she was already much more than a participant to me. The sharing of updates and thoughts about the latest events naturally combined with our tasks as interns. Furthermore, by facilitating my access to written texts, different people, and events, she soon became an unexpected research assistant. Beyond that, her presence behind the scenes went beyond practical matters. Her interests, views, and her engagement with 'feminist sisters' influenced progressively but unnoticeably the direction of the study. In my last days in the field, I asked myself what would have happened if someone else had been sitting next to me. Intersubjectivity, here we come again. But the truth is that the strongest realisation came to me when I was sitting at my desk back home. Trying to make sense out of the data, I noticed that she was present in one way or another in almost all instances of sisterhood under study. So, it started to seem logical to me to navigate the story of this research through her experience. And so, new relevant insights were drawn in the process of writing. Nevertheless, these discoveries would not have been possible without the insights provided by all the collaborators of the research, to whom I am deeply grateful. In effect, their views and experiences frame, support, and counterbalance the story at the core of this research. So much so that their contributions have inspired the elaboration of

the concepts and different chapters composing this piece. It is then important to acknowledge them, and Sue in particular, as co-creators in this regard. Despite the choice of being anonymised for the purpose of this research, I will do my best to ensure that her essence, and that of all collaborators, is properly captured. All in all, I hope these reflexive examinations help the reader as much the writer to understand the particularities underpinning the findings of this research.

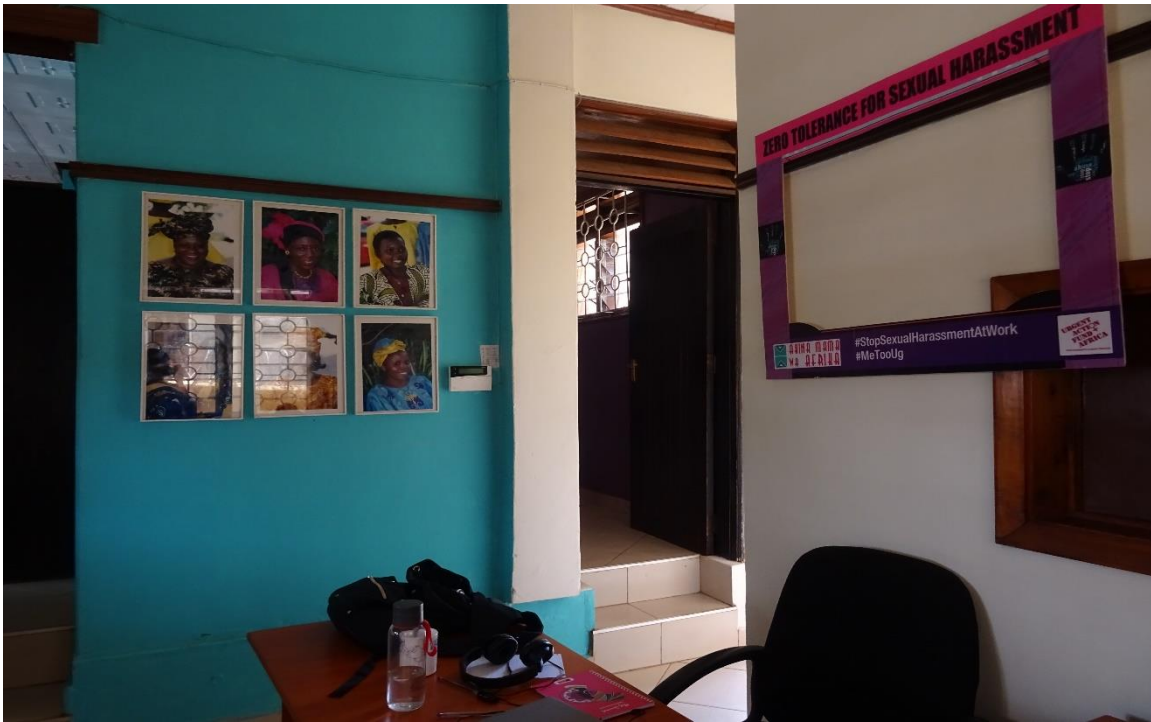# Chapter 4. What lies behind the 'feminist sisters'?

Figure 5. View of the office space. 9th February 2020.

To answer the question of 'why does the idea of solidarity emerge at the individual level of young feminists?', I have focused on the personal journey of two women, Sue and Patricia, who had participated in the African Women Leadership Institute and worked at AMwA at the time of this research. The decision is motivated by several reasons. On the one hand, these stories provide a comparative overview of some of the factors that impact to different extents the engagement of young Ugandan women with feminism. On the other, it allows exploring this process from an evolutionary perspective within the specificities of the context of Kampala. To explore the connections between their individual experience and the adoption of the feminist idea of sisterhood, I take the approach of 'affective solidarity' developed by Clare Hemmings (2012). The British scholar proposes an approach of 'affect' to understand the modes of engagement of women with feminist politics. Then, I complement this approach with a comparative analysis of the role of social media as a space encouraging young women's engagement with feminism. In the case of Sue, I employ Keller's theory (2015) to understand how the collective dynamics on the Internet influence young women's engagement with feminism and the effects on their agency. As mentioned before, I take the definition provided by Kaun, Kyriakidou, and Uldam (2016) to conceptualise the latter. Finally, I explore Sue and Patricia's journeys within the social context of Kampala, where it is a problematic thing to be a feminist. This section focuses on the influence of the Christian church, one of the most relevant institutions not only in this society but also in the lives of young women. How they deal with the tension derived from both ideologies in their day-to-day will be addressed.

'Why did I become a feminist?'

I can still remember the moment I met these young women on my first day of internship. The walls of Akina Mama wa Afrika office spoke for themselves. I could feel the faces of African women leaders looking at me while my supervisor introduced me to the working team. I observed the library full of books and reports, the pictures from the Ugandan Feminist Forum, and a framed letter whose bigger letters read 'Sister, I believe you.' The last stop of the tour would take us to my future desk and closer work colleagues. I remember my supervisor introducing them as the youngest staff members, also working as interns. Surprised by the maturity they transmitted, I could feel a different, vibrant energy in that space. I was gladly welcomed by the soft, loving smile of Patricia, who did not hesitate to ask me about my choice of coming to Uganda. At the same time, I perceived a radically different presence by my side. Something like a whirlwind of energy. It came from Sue. I wonder whether the contrast of both personalities created that special atmosphere. In the following days, I started grasping a little bit more from them. Patricia had finished her degree in Human Rights almost three years ago and was supporting the running of the African Women Leadership Institute at the time. She had herself been an 'alumna' in 2017 of one of its projects. The will to advance in her professional career and act in her community had pushed her to apply to the leadership programme. On her right side, Sue was devoted to her work as an advocate in the field of sexual and gender-based violence against women. Having finished her degree in Law not long ago, she had decided to apply to the same programme. Far from being satisfied, they started to be actively involved in the feminist movement through the initiatives of AMwA, to which they attributed much of their growth in knowledge, skills, and acquaintances. Later, they both decided to launch their professional career by taking part in the organisation itself. However, as time passed, I could not help but wonder about the deeper reasons that had pushed them to engage so actively with the cause. In the first interview with Sue, she traveled from the office to her childhood home. She shared how the aftermath of the separation of her parents had opened her eyes to appreciate many situations that were 'unfair' to her mother, sisters, and her. While recognising that she was not fully aware at the time, she described a continuous sense of frustration when she compared their situation to that of her male family members.

> 'Just starting to pay attention to how…maybe, like, my brothers, my father's sons were treated differently from us, who were girls (…) 'It's not fair if I have to…If my mum has to do all this work and my brothers just sit there and do nothing, or us, we do all the work, and they just sit there and do nothing, and eat and play football. I mean, 'I want to play football!''

> (Sue, Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

Similarly, Patricia recalls how helpless she felt when observing numerous cases of violence against women in her community, where it was regarded as nothing but a good habit.

> 'I grew up in a place, community where domestic violence was taken normal. People fight, especially men fight, beat women. Uhm…In fact, people in that community believe that if a man does not beat you, he does not love you (…) So, I was kind of tired. So tired'

In her theory of 'affective solidarity,' Clare Hemmings also uses examples of the household to illustrates that moment of 'affect,' such as anger, frustration, or rage, as the departing point for feminist transformation. The experiences of both participants seem to match very well with her description of 'feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others' (2012, 150). She continues to argue that this feeling of affective dissonance is critical for triggering a personal sense of injustice, which has the potential of evolving into the need to transform this reality. In the case of Sue, this feeling marked her personal and professional aspirations:

> 'I think, if my mum had someone who had the right information to tell her 'oh no, you don't have to leave the house and start over', she would have been, like, in a better place or something like that. So, obviously, I kept thinking 'I want to become a lawyer, and fight for women's rights, and help women like my mum.''

(Sue, 29th January 2020)

As we can appreciate, these moments of 'affect' later evolved into a desire of change that already betrayed an early sense of solidarity with other women facing the same situation as her mum. In the case of Patricia, these aspects emerged out of her life within the community, which ignited her frustration towards widespread norms and practices that impact women negatively. Hemmings identifies this awareness of injustice as a departing point for a potential search of alternative values, and those who uphold them (2017, 157). In the next section, we explore how this encounter might be facilitated in the context of Kampala through the use of social media.

The role of social media

In her book *Girls' feminist blogging in a postfeminist age'* Keller (2015) draws attention to the increasing trend of young women who engage with social media as they see the need to protest in their own lives. According to Pereira (2017), this trend is also followed by young women living in urban areas of Africa, to the extent their material conditions allow them. The virtual world, especially on Twitter, provides an open platform where they can interact with other like-minded individuals, breaking their sense of isolation (Schuster 2013, cited by Carson 2018).

> 'So, I was like 'Oh, so I am not crazy,' like, 'there are women that actually think like me, there are women who think that certain things are unfair, there are women who think that we shouldn't live in a world where we are, essentially, treated like second-class citizens (…) So ah, ok, I am not crazy; that's good, awesome, there are many of us.''

(Sue, Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

The encounter of Sue illustrates the power of these platforms to connect people and create a space to share personal opinions, experiences, new ideas, and learnings, all with a feminist lens (see Jackson 2018; Keller 2015; Martin and Valenti 2012). Expanding Hemming's theory, I argue that the Twitter community helped her make sense of her

experience of 'affective dissonance' and develop a sense of belonging that still bonds them nowadays.

> 'So, yeah, I think a lot of my feminism was…A lot of interaction with other feminists, especially online. Most of them are my friends now, I think, or at least I am acquainted with them. 'Yes, friend, post your thinking!' I started saying I am feminist'

> (Sue, 29th January 2020)

This quote invites us to look into the potential relationship between online communities and individual political agency. In her study of young feminists and digital media in New Zealand, Sue Jackson asserted that, nowadays, digital media constitutes a familiar, readily accessible resource for young women to participate in feminist politics (2018, 45). In this case, we can appreciate how Sue's interaction with Twitter feminists ignited her feminist engagement online, from which a new identity started to be formed. Keller's theory (2015) becomes especially illustrative of this process. She argues that the production and reproduction of feminist content - in this case, Tweets – has become the vehicle through which young women start developing an active political identity as feminists. In the case of Sue, this process was ideologically grounded during and after her participation in the leadership program, as we will see later.

However, Patricia's experience offers a different approach. In our WhatsApp interview (6th March 2020), she did not attribute any role to the online community in relation with her engagement with feminism. Even though she has an active profile online nowadays, she affirmed that her feminist activism started only after she participated in the leadership programme. However, tracing back how such an application came to her, she admits that it was precisely on Twitter where a friend of hers saw the programme's announcement. Therefore, despite not having direct contact with online communities, we can still appreciate the informational role of social media facilitating her later engagement with feminism.

Feminism: Problems and indecency

> 'But still, I didn't have, I didn't say 'I am feminist' because at the time it was very 'Hmmm, you are feminist, you are a man-hater.''

> (Sue, Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

During the three months of fieldwork, it would not be uncommon to hear around me the word 'feminist' accompanied by 'problematic,' 'radical' or 'extreme.' This situation corresponds with Guma's analysis (2017) of the public image of feminists in the country, where mainstream media depicts them as 'frustrated,' 'miserable spinsters,' 'castrators', or 'homewreckers'' (p. 23). For Patricia, it was at university where she first heard about these comments. She remembered how one of her lecturers had discouraged her from knowing more about the movement when he referred to Ugandan feminist scholars, such as Sylvia Tamale or Stella Nyanzi, as 'indecent' women (WhatsApp conversation, 6th March). Exploring the sources of the current trend of conservatism takes us to one of the most relevant institutions in Ugandan society. Perhaps due to the striking difference with my Western context, I had soon appreciated the relevance of the church for some of my

feminist colleagues. I could observe how religion was woven into their day-to-day when they attended church after work or naturally expressed their religiosity in conversations at the office. This is hardly surprising in a country where Christians make up 86% of the total population, according to the 2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census, cited by Ward (2015). According to the author, the long presence of the Catholic and Anglican churches is deeply embedded in a country that regards them as the guardians of public morality. As such, they play a central role in influencing public opinion on Uganda's social, spiritual, and political life. To them, we should add the Pentecostalist churches, which have dramatically increased its presence, especially amongst the urban population.

However, the relationship between feminism and Christianity is not an easy one. At the political level, it was represented by the banning of a local staging of the play *The Vagina monologues* in 2005. The Ministry of Ethics and Integrity censored the event with the support of eighteen church leaders who stood in coalition for 'morality, ethics, and integrity in Uganda' (Horn 2013, 19). In this line, Pastor Martin Ssempa offers another illustrative example. Making use of national media, this influential religious leader has often criticised the activities of women's rights groups and publicly questioned feminists' moral standing (p.20). In this context, it is not surprising that Patricia had initially perceived feminism as a threat to her religiosity.

> 'And also, as a strong Catholic (…) I was like 'wow, this is something that is going to affect my religion'. So, I did not want to get close to it. I really did not think that I would ever be a feminist'
>
> (WhatsApp interview, 6th March 2020)

On her side, Sue did not hesitate to talk about the challenges she faced when she was a very active member of several church groups. She recognised how fear of social rejection had often stopped her from speaking up against discriminatory attitudes. In this regard, participating in the leadership programme had marked a turning point. Walking after attending mass together, she explained that the knowledge acquired during those days had opened her eyes to the patriarchal features of the church. Thereupon she took up the mission of questioning the church's conservative views on women's autonomy and sexuality in her community group (Fieldnotes, conversation on the street, 7th March 2020). Similarly, some days before, Patricia had shared how she had challenged a boy in her church group that defended the practice of labia elongation[1].

> ''Why don't you elongate your penis?', she answered. Sue, Patricia and I burst out laughing. She kept on saying that another guy commented how radical she had become since she started working in AMwA'
>
> (Fieldnotes, at the office, 27th February 2020)

These experiences offer interesting insights into how young feminists negotiate their capacity to develop critical thinking within 'sexist social and political institutions and to

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[1] Labia elongation, also called labia stretching or labia pulling, is categorized as a type of female genital mutilation. Traditionally practiced in some communities of Uganda, it consists of lengthening the inner lips of the female genitals with the purpose of enhancing pleasure in sexual intercourse (see Pérez and Namulondo, 2010)

mount active resistance' in creative ways that are context-specific (Meyers, 2014). In this case, we observe how Sue and Patricia are developing ways to transform these institutions through their engagement from within. However, the influence of religion is not limited to the physical limits of the church; it constitutes one of their main links to their closest circles. In this sense, Patricia admitted that being feminist was still challenging for her at home due to the opposition of her mother, who is a firm Catholic and feels strongly against feminism (Patricia, in my house, 13th March 2020). The complexity of this relationship is further illustrated at the personal level, where the tension between feminism and religion becomes uneasy to manage. Sue was particularly outspoken in this regard. Adopting a self-critical stand, she pointed out how aware she was about the role of the church reinforcing the patriarchal society from which it emerges. At the same time, she acknowledged this institution at the core of her personal growth.

> 'I still struggle with the whole Church thing (…) Also because it is a very big part of who I am. Like, I grew up there…And I think my first experiences of leadership were in church. So, I am not blind to the flaws of the church, but also I know it is like any other…It's part of the patriarchal system'

> (Sue, Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

In conclusion, this chapter invites us to explore the early stages of young women's engagement with feminism in Uganda. Following Hemmings' approach on 'affective solidarity' (2012), one could observe how the initial sense of injustice and frustration gave rise in Sue and Patricia to an early sense of solidarity that predisposes them to connect and engage with others. Then, I addressed the role of social media in facilitating this process. While Sue's experience illustrates Twitter as a tool to connect with feminist communities and develop an early sense of agency and identity as a feminist, for Patricia, it constituted an indirect, unintentional channel to feminism. These interactions are framed within a cultural context where the feminist tag acquires negative connotations. Tracing back its sources, the last section explored the role of the church as one of the leading institutions influencing this environment. Through the experience of Sue and Patricia, it is appreciated how young women use their agency and critical thinking to deal with the tension emerging from both ideologies in their daily lives.

Chapter 5. *My sister's keeper*: When solidarity evolves into sisterhood

Figure 6. Project carried out by Noella Kabale to economically empower refugee women in Kampala. 24th January, 2020.

In this chapter, I develop the idea of 'sisterhood' from a combination of theoretical and field-based approaches. Firstly, a brief historical overview is provided to frame the roots of these concerns within the African feminist movement. Then, I continue the journey with Sue and Patricia to define the concept throughout their experience, focusing on the connections between solidarity, community, and the individual. In this regard, I keep on employing the concept of political agency by Kaun et al. (2016) to explore its relationship with the practice of sisterhood. Furthermore, the role of the feminist discourse will be analysed from a critical approach to understanding the aims behind the creation of these dynamics. Finally, I address the implications of these ideas at the movement-building level, where the attainment of sisterhood becomes both a strategy and goal to be achieved.

Elaborating the concept

'Sisterhood for me is the political solidarity between women on issues that are pertinent to the feminist movement.'

(Eunice Musiime, Interview at the office, 27th February 2020)

The definition above given by the Executive Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika brings us back in time to the United States of the 1980s. Although the origins can be traced back to Kate Millet and her motto 'Women of the world, unite!' (Morgan 1970) black feminists developed the current idea of sisterhood in reaction to this claim. Questioning the ideal of a universal, homogenous unity of women, the renowned scholar bell hooks brought to the debate the disregarded experiences of black women. She criticised this notion for creating a false sense of 'womanhood' that applied homogeneously to all women in the world, ignoring different historical, geographical, cultural, economic, and socio-political backgrounds. Doing so, hooks shook the theoretical assumptions of second-wave feminists that regarded gender as the only or primary source of oppression. In this sense, she pointed out the futility of sisterhood based on victimisation, a privilege that black women could not afford when confronting a life of exploitation and exclusion. In this sense, it was stressed the hypocrisy of white feminists defending such ideas while achieving their socioeconomic autonomy at the expense of poorly paid non-white women (Oyewumi 2003). The study of the oppression generated by the combination of classism, sexism, and racism laid the ground for the development of the current theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In the face of these differences, bell hooks proposed to replace the idea of 'common oppression' for one of 'shared strengths and resources' that could create an inclusive movement that empowered women daily: 'We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity' (hooks 1984, 65). Based on this ideal is the principle of unity and sisterhood endorsed by the African feminist movement, whose discourse depicts it as both the strategy and the goal to be achieved. For Sue and Patricia, these ideas were brought to life during their participation in the leadership programme. According to their testimonies, this event became a turning point in their trajectories for different reasons. In the case of Sue, she considers it as the departing point for her feminism to be grounded in theory and reflection; for Patricia, it was especially fruitful in terms of self-awareness and personal wellbeing.

'That's what the training did for me. Knowing, one, where to get the information, like to read and know that being feminist means to constantly read, and constantly understand, and constantly reflect.'

(Sue, Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

'Before (…) I could really take time to know people, take time to know what is affecting my community, but not take time to know me and what's really affecting me. So, just to let you know that it ??? got to know me a lot better (…) and understand myself.'

(Patricia, WhatsApp interview, 6th March 2020)

Beyond these aspects, Sue and Patricia were introduced to a space of young women in which they could collectively share and reflect upon their personal experience of injustice and connect it to that of the others through a feminist lens. This resonates with the bonding practices of feminist 'raising-awareness groups', where women examine their lives and experiences not only through discussions but also 'howling, screaming, complaining, whining' (Rodriguez 2010, 448-449). The empowering effect of solidarity in these groups was highlighted by the second-wave scholar Nancy Hartsock who, cited by Meyers (2014), held that women discover their own value and 'gain authentic agency only through acts of solidarity with feminist protesters' (Meyers, 2014). In the context of Uganda, Ms. Musiime identifies the African tradition of community as the source that naturally nurtures these dynamics:

'But also, based on our social culture, structures, it is what has made the sisterhood work. African states, at least when they were more egalitarian, it was based on community. So, the spirit of Ubuntu, of community, was already ingrained. So, you wouldn't see a fellow woman suffering on the street, and you don't raise up to the occasion. So, that is also what feminism as a principle has drawn from, that we are in this space together.'

(Interview at the office, 27th February 2020)

Following participants' different testimonies, I argue that this bonding experience lays the ground for young women to start a journey in which that early sense of solidarity comes to be embodied by the group. While not undermining the relevance of online communities, as illustrated above, this experience of community embedded a deeper political meaning to Sue and Patricia's desires of transformation. In this sense, the feminist discourse of sisterhood gave a distinctive meaning to these interactions, which encouraged their awareness and will to challenge the structural dynamics behind the marginalisation and abuse of women (Sweetman 2013, 227). Furthermore, the knowledge acquired sparked in these young women a process of individual reflection about themselves and their purpose in society. In our interview, Sue illustrated this moment in time when she asked herself, 'Now that I know what the problem is, what can I do?' (Interview at the office, 29th January 2020).

Engaging in sisterhood becomes a possible answer and a way to increase their personal agency and that of the others in a defiant way. Ideologically, it represents the endeavour

to challenge the patriarchal social norms that dictate enmity amongst women through their mutual recognition as 'sisters'.

> '…And I don't care about certain weaknesses or certain inconsistencies that she has, but because she is a woman and I realise that she probably shares the same history as I do, that she probably shares the same challenges as I do. I recognise her as a sister. I choose her as a sister. So, just making that choice of being someone's sister is an act of love, and it is very radical'

> (Leah Eryenyu, Interview at a hotel, 7th February 2020)

By referring to this history, Ms. Erenyu is incorporating the specific approach of African feminism that seeks to connect women through their experience of colonialism, liberation struggles, and the effects of globalisation. At the same time, this perspective is cognizant of the diversity of their contexts, identities, and processes (AFF 2006). Therefore, engaging in sisterhood stands as a deliberate effort amongst activists who share the goal of transforming the structures enabling oppression of any kind (e.g., gender, racial, class, sexual, cultural, ethnic, and sexual). To achieve this aim, values such as solidarity, commitment, or care are encouraged to play a central role, as we will explore later.

In terms of movement-building, the endorsement of these ideas is critical to strengthen the capacity to act of the feminist movement in the country. According to Ms. Eryenyu, this exercise of solidarity becomes a way to build relationships of trust and accountability between activists in the movement. (Leah Eryenyu, Interview at a hotel, 7th February 2020). Similarly, for the African feminist Moiyattu Banya, the use of the term 'sis' becomes an intentional act to promote authentic relationships alliances with African women in support of the individual and the collective (Banya 2015). Following this logic, we arrive at the rationale behind the use of 'sisterhood' to refer to the feminist movement. Rebecca Achom illustrates these connections as follows:

> 'You can't talk about solidarity and not talk about sisterhood. And you can't talk about sisterhood and not talk about movement-building. You have…Sisterhood is a collective of people, which is the movement-building. And so, people come together…You can't collect people together and not create solidarity, because, then, what is the essence?'

> (Rebecca Achom, Interview at the office, 5th March 2020)

Therefore, sisterhood can be defined as the principle of solidarity amongst women – either as individuals, groups, or organisations - who adopt a common political standpoint and the determination to transform social structures that perpetuate forms of oppression, especially those affecting women. This principle inspires the creation of networks between female activists and feminists who recognise each other as 'sisters,' a commitment which already constitutes a break with the social norms that dictate enmity

amongst women. Drawn from this ideal is the use of the term to depict the feminist movement constituted by these networks. Nevertheless, the practice of sisterhood is highly dependent on the context and the aims at which it is aimed. The Kenyan feminist Sika Varyanne refers to them in the following terms:

> 'To unlearn sexism, to collectively work towards a clarity in what we mean in and by our different feminisms and to share how we do our feminisms, to ask and offer each other support where we can, to share our frustrations, to laugh, to talk, to be, sisters' (2015, 4)

To conclude, the concept of sisterhood has been developed in a dialogue between theory and experience. Through the journey of Sue and Patricia, I have analysed the process of transformation of an early sense of solidarity into sisterhood. At the personal level, the sense of injustice and solidarity already present in themselves becomes reinterpreted by the feminist discourse of sisterhood. The analysis shows that the commitment of being a 'sister' to the others becomes especially meaningful when it is experienced and shared in community. For Sue and Patricia, the principle of solidarity became embodied firstly by the leadership programme's network, which subsequently transformed into a sisterhood. In this process, the role of feminist discourse becomes crucial. It is manifested how feminists make intentional use of this tool to give political meaning to their relationships and strengthen the cohesion of the broader social movement. Such aims are closely linked to the identity that emerges from this process, connecting their feminist politics to a reinforced or new sense of self in society. To achieve this purpose, the solidarity emerging from these dynamics seems crucial to enhance their agency as individuals and as a collective. How these feminist networks represent and engage with sisterhood will be explored in the two following chapters.

Chapter 6. *Being there*: Sisterhood as a support system

Figure 7. Convening of young feminist women belonging to one of AMwA's leadership projects. 11th February 2020.

Guided with the question of 'why is the sisterhood relevant in terms of support system for young feminists in the context of Uganda?', this chapter addresses the role of feminist networks enhancing young women's capacity to act in their day-to-day. How feminist solidarity manifests in practical and emotional terms will be illustrated through the experience of different collaborators. Drawn from interviews and field observations is the relevance of social media facilitating these interactions, taking place in the realm of WhatsApp. Following the 'informational' approach developed by Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés (2019), I analyse the use of this platform by feminists to strengthen sisterhood dynamics beyond physical encounters. I complement these examinations with a critical discourse approach to understand the role of the feminist discourse in this regard. Finally, this analysis requires an appreciation of the specific contexts within which such networks develop. In the last section, an overview of the socio-cultural landscape of Uganda is provided to understand the sisterhood as a coping mechanism to deal with the challenges encountered in this context.

Community, care, and politics

'I think sisterhood means that you are willing to walk a certain mile with this
person. It means doing checking at times that may be very inconvenient to you (…)
Going beyond to make sure that someone is actually safe, that they are cared for
and loved'

(Leah Eryenyu, Interview at a hotel, 7th February 2020)

It was in the first interview that the idea of sisterhood came to the table in a seemingly natural way. Thinking about how the leadership programme had contributed to her life, Sue used this term to define the new circle of young women she had met there. In this early reference, one could already observe her adoption of the feminist discourse, which, in this case, comes motivated by AMwA's movement-building goals. By reiterating the importance of finding people 'who understood her politics' – an element already mentioned in her encounter with the online community -, Sue illustrates how rare feminist ideas are in the context of Uganda. Stepping out to the continental level, Sika Varyanne addresses the relevance of ideological affinity and identification in fostering solidarity amongst activists:

> 'Ideologically, naming ourselves as feminists is important for solidarity. Accepting
> the language, the word 'feminism', specifically, which describes an ideological
> standpoint against sexism and patriarchal structures, in an indication of change, and
> the desire for such a change, in the negative social attitudes about it' (2015, 36)

In the present case study, such affinity was created through the experience of the training, where participants jointly adopted an African feminist standpoint and committed to being agents of change (AMwA 2019). From their testimonies, it is deduced that this affinity took roots and laid the ground for the current bonds in place today. Considering that organising or attending meetings is not always feasible, these relationships come reinforced assiduously through online interactions on WhatsApp. During the three months of study, I primarily observed group discussions on feminism and other related topics organised by AMwA. Members were invited to share matters of concern weekly to debate and grow their knowledge collectively. Also, discussions spontaneously emerged when a particular issue was brought up by any of the members, asking for the others' opinions. Similarly, according to the collaborators, these networks of women also prove to be resourceful in practical terms. In our interview, Ms. Musiime had affirmed that the call for sisterhood has often been effective for pooling resources together and offering their time and skills to advance the cause in the country (Interview at the office, 27th February 2020). Sue, on her side, commented how common it was for her and her peers to share amongst them professional opportunities, personal writings, and initiatives or even promote their personal businesses. She especially emphasised her reliance on the 'sisters' to carry out tasks related to her activist work. In our interview, she linked this

aspect with her presence on social media platforms, where the support of these networks becomes critical to denounce an issue and amplify its reach.

> 'If there's a cause that you want people to rally behind, I know that I am just going to put in the (…) group and there is going to be a few people that will be like 'Oh, I would actually like to do this.''

> (Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

These views are supported by the experience of Pauline Kahuubire, who finds the support of feminist 'sisters' particularly critical for her activism on platforms such as Twitter.

> 'Yeah, at least I know that if I see something that I want to talk about and probably I don't have the energy or the mental capacity to talk about it, I can reach out to feminist sisters to back me up, and support me'

> (Pauline Kahuubire, Interview at the office, 6th February 2020)

Nevertheless, support at a personal level is perhaps the element that makes the difference between a loose network of activists and a 'sisterhood.' In effect, most participants in this study stressed the relevance of sisterhood in emotional terms beyond the practicalities and strategies of activism. On different occasions, several collaborators translated this aspect of solidarity into 'being there' for other women in the movement. In one of our daily conversations at the office, Patricia and Sue emphatically affirmed that real sisterhood only takes place when women take care of each other and are sensitive and accountable to them (Conversation at the office, 2nd March 2020). In this regard, the African feminist Moiyattu Banya gives personal account of how the bonds created between activists naturally fed into her personal life and that of her peers (Banya, 2015). Being aware that this pattern might not always take place, the experience of Sue becomes illustrative of how both kinds of support can potentially complement each other:

> 'But also, emotional support in terms of, like…They just understand what it is to be feminist in our country. Still the effort. And just having people you can bench to about… *(She chuckles)* What is going on, what is happening. (…) And just having, knowing that you have some kind of support system in your feminist journey'

> (Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

Following the trends in the use of Instant Messaging (IM) applications, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2019) observed how WhatsApp has increasingly become an effective tool for encouraging citizen engagement. Going beyond leisure, the authors analysed the 'informational' uses of this platform, allowing participants to share news, and raise awareness and discuss social problems (p.3). During the three months of study, I observed weekly discussions on WhatsApp groups addressing a wide variety of topics, ranging from health and self-care to gender discrimination and violence. Perhaps more impressive was the employment of this platform to address sensitive issues related to political affairs or sex. I followed up closely one of the discussions addressing the latter, focused on speaking up about beliefs and challenges around sex satisfaction. The debate was accompanied by a foreign news article that informed the participants about the topic and framed the debate. This practice illustrates the use of this IM platform as a tool for mobilising information not easily accessible in closer, traditional media (2019, 4). In the following screenshot, we can observe the welcoming message to participate in the discussion:

> Its time sisters....
>
> Good afternoon beautiful people...
> Its this time of the day when we have some "Sister Safe space" to discuss about issues that concern us, issues that develop or challenge us with a view to finding solutions. Uhmmm welcome!
>
> Some one is asking her self, does sex really develop us?
>
> The ans is yeeeees it does...its part of our wellbeing. Some thing we usually ignore as women... Or try to practise for the sake of our partners... Uhmmm here comes the questions from me WHAT ABOUT US?!
>
> I request you to take a few minutes off and get the answers for this starting now...
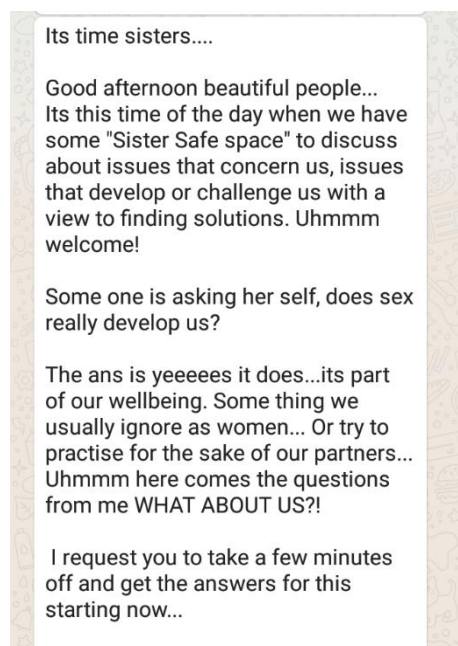
Figure 8. WhatsApp message, 20th February 2020

Considering it an illustrative example of the discourse employed by and amongst feminists, I intend to analyse the aims and considerations behind the references to 'sisterhood' present in this text. In the first sentence reading, 'It's time sisters,' we can see how the facilitator of the debate uses this term to address the other women within the group. In this case, she expects to attract the attention of her peers and encourage them to engage in the conversation. I had already observed in other online interactions that this usage was a common practice amongst them. Then, the moderator continues to refer to

the 'Sister Safe space' they are about to create to discuss issues of common interest. In this regard, feminists are using the features of privacy and immediacy offered by WhatsApp (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2019) to hold an exclusive space for them to share. Also, by making this reference, the speaker seeks to remind the audience of the relationships previously set to bond them, based on proximity, trust, and lack of social judgment. In this sense, the speaker is encouraging the reproduction of these dynamics on this virtual space, inciting them to participate as they would offline. This case shows the use of social media as a platform to relocate the practices of traditional consciousness-raising groups online (Martin and Valenti 2012, 10). Furthermore, the discourse of sisterhood becomes instrumental for the reinforcement of the feminist collective identity. These dynamics become possible on a platform that allows them to collectively share ideas and reflections assiduously (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2019, 4). On this occasion, the welcoming message was successful in triggering an enthusiastic discussion amongst participants, who showed high interest. Jokes combined with personal experiences and questions around the topics on the table in a friendly atmosphere.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that not all weekly discussions would receive such an active response. In fact, this discussion was one of the most followed during the three months of observation and yet accounted for relatively low numbers of participation (7 out of 50 members from the two cohorts of the same leadership programme, plus 37 added members of another programme and AMwA staff). While online participation alone cannot be illustrative of the interest or commitment of members – factors such as availability and access to the internet, to name a few, need to be considered -, it points to a broader trend of relatively low engagement of 'alumnae' in the feminist cause. Executive Director Ms. Musiime informally estimated that out of 25 participants in each cohort, five remain highly committed and active; another five are interested and involved at times; the other five engage just periodically, and ten members remain inactive (Group discussion at the office, 4th March 2020). It is necessary to note that, according to some collaborators, the network under examination constitutes one of the most active in terms of individual and collective engagement nowadays. In effect, Sue and Patricia distinguished their network from others for having succeeded in developing a 'sisterhood' spirit characterised by a genuine interest in each other's wellbeing.

A context of silence, fear, and burn-out

Examining these interactions invites us to pay attention to the cultural context within which they become meaningful. The participants' jokes and comments on the WhatsApp group already betrayed certain sensitivity and discomfort around the topic conversation. In effect, Sue and Patricia would expressly make clear to me that this kind of issue is rarely addressed in other social settings (Conversation at the office, 20th February 2020).

This level of reticence seems to relate to the widespread 'culture of silence' and conservatism the moderator would mention later on the WhatsApp conversation. In this regard, this discussion exemplifies the objective of feminist groups to unveil those social norms that prevent women from thriving in personal and public spheres. Some conversations at the office are also illustrative of this mixed environment. Sensitive issues such as nakedness generated a mixed environment of openness and discomfort, showing a divide between those who excitedly welcomed these practices and those who did not seem to approve of them. In these conversations, activists would often refer to the political establishment as a censorious threat to be reckoned with, represented by the Ugandan Ministry of Integrity and Ethics. In effect, the evolution of this governmental body is indicative of the current trend of hostility towards women's rights and freedoms in the country. Having promoted women's rights in the 1990s under Minister Miria Matembe, this institution came to be headed by religious figures in 2006, shifting its focus towards the criminalisation of sexual issues (Ward 2015). A case in point was the proposal in 2009 of the 'Anti-Homosexuality Bill' (commonly referred to as the 'Kill the Gays' Bill), which spurred a strong reaction from the international and national queer movement supported by some women parliamentarians, feminist organisations and activists. Another illustrative example was the 'Anti-Pornographic Bill' in 2013, quickly nicknamed the 'Mini-skirt Bill' due to the restrictions it imposed on female clothing (Guma 2017, 23). Then, it is not surprising that those committed to protecting women's rights in the country face issues of fatigue. The words of Pauline Kahuubire are illustrative of this regard:

> 'I don't know, maybe people are tired. There's an issue of burn-out; it's the same people responding all the time. So, when something happens, it's 'ok, so now just let me be honest with myself, I can't deal with this'. Because they are expecting you to deal with it, everyone else will seat back'

> (Interview at the office, 6th February 2020)

In this line, the celebration of the 2019 Ugandan Feminist Forum (UFF) brought to the forefront the far-reaching impacts of such context on the lives of activists and the operationality of the movement. Under the theme "Silencing Our Fears and Fearing Our Silence," the Forum opened the debate around the political and sociocultural backlash feminists face nowadays:

> 'We fear that we may be thrown into pitch-black dungeons, emerging battered and bruised, if we ever join a protest. We fear the almost inevitable rejection and violence from families, friends, and church—a community that means so much to us—when they find out about our sexuality. We fear working on contested issues such as abortion and sex work because they are in conflict with our Faiths and moral stances' (UFF 2019, 2).

Hence the importance of articulating alternative networks of support on which activists can lean and tackle the fracture with their closer communities. In this regard, Sweetman already observed how collective action fosters the creation of such links between women, enabling them to reduce their dependency from traditional social relations (2013, 218). In the feminist movement, we observe that the establishment of these relationships is based on the idea of 'sisterhood.' At the movement-building level, the confrontation of such a cultural and political environment grounds the objective of feminists of creating a community to reaffirm themselves and collectively heal (Leah Eryenyu, Interview at a hotel, 7th February 2020). In the case of Sue, this engagement has direct implications for her political agency. In the following quote, she reflects upon how belonging to this community enhances her motivation to continue with these efforts:

> 'Just having this safety of having people that you are learning with, that you are walking with, it just allows me to do my work. Well, not allow me, but…It gives me a kind of push to do my work. Because I know that there are many of us that are contributing in different, small, and big ways, so knowing that I am just part of a bigger collective of women that are doing phenomenal feminist work…'

(Interview at the office, 29th January 2020)

In this chapter, I have analysed how sisterhood is understood and acted upon within close networks of young feminists in Uganda. Following Sue's journey, I have focused on the first feminist network she belonged to within the feminist movement, created by AMwA in the wake of the leadership programme in which she participated. I have supported the findings from this case study with the experiences of other feminists within the movement. Drawn from their views is a common interpretation of sisterhood as a community of mutual support, care, and growth. Its contribution becomes relevant for feminists in practical but also emotional terms. In this sense, their testimonies evidence how feminist communities act in different ways as engines propelling the individual agency of young women in Uganda. Looking into how these bonds are maintained and reinforced, the social media and the feminist discourse come to the forefront. Given the reliance of feminist groups on WhatsApp, I examined both elements through the example of an active online discussion held on this platform by the members of this network. This analysis showed how young women are using this app as a 'safe space' to relocate and reproduce their dynamics as a raising-awareness group online. In this sense, WhatsApp becomes the virtual space where they can discuss, laugh, and share experiences, reinforcing the bonds that bring them together. To this purpose, the language of sisterhood becomes crucial. The use of the word 'sister' not only seeks to promote their online engagement but also reinforce their collective identity as feminists. Furthermore, the discussion analysed becomes an illustrative example of the feminist aim of challenging and dismantling social taboos that prevent women from thriving. The mixed response of openness and reluctance offers relevant insights into the Ugandan sociocultural

environment, which is also constitutive of their ideas and behaviours. In this regard, the reaffirmation coming from the 'sisters' becomes critical in their encounter with an increasingly hostile, conservative context. In response to the social rejection emerging from closer circles, feminist networks of solidarity stand as an alternative system that supports them in their endeavour.

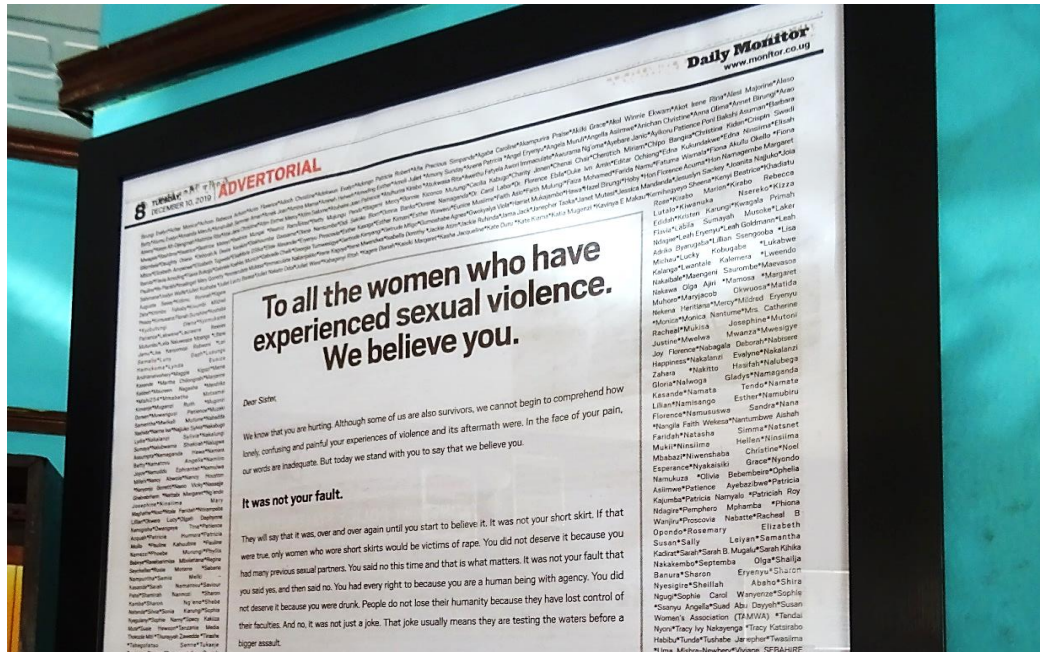# Chapter 7. *Standing up*: Sisterhood as a primary-response mechanism

Figure 9. Letter written by AMwA staff and published by the newspaper *The Daily Monitor* on 10th December 2019 in support of sexual violence survivors. 9th February 2020.

The last section of this dissertation invites us to explore sisterhood from a perspective that places activism at the centre. This chapter shifts the focus towards an external dimension of solidarity exercised with women affected by violence and injustice in the country. To answer the question of 'why is the sisterhood acting as a primary-response mechanism in the context of Uganda?', I combine the views and experiences of different collaborators with the account of events and observations to elaborate on such a concept theoretically. Then, I explore the case of activism of #FreeSheena from my first-hand experience to offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the role of social media in it. To this purpose, I analyse WhatsApp and Twitter as the main tools to mobilise, organise, and engage with activism. In the case of the former, I link the study of this platform with the findings of Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2018) on the political uses of WhatsApp; for the latter, I rely upon different authors who discuss the effectiveness of Twitter and the hashtag for these purposes. This analysis would be incomplete without addressing the contribution of the discourse on sisterhood, and so, I incorporate such considerations in the study of both platforms. To conclude, this chapter invites us to navigate through the political and social environment of Uganda that limits but also fuels the emergence of such expressions of feminist solidarity.

Solidarity and collective action

'If we are going to march, I will march with her. If we are going to face down a
certain politician, I will stand up for her. If she's being abused online, I will stand
up for her'

(Leah Eryenyu, Interview, 7th February 2020)

It would take just a few days to see how these words became real before my eyes. During
my stay at the office, I had come to observe and listen to my colleagues talk about the
challenges they and other activists faced to bring change in the country. It was the time
to support Stella Nyanzi, the Ugandan academic, feminist, and queer activist who had
been imprisoned several times for challenging the Ugandan president, Yoweri K.
Museveni (Odhiambo 2020). My collaborators would often illustrate the practice of
sisterhood with examples of actions taken to support her, ranging from visiting her in
prison to pushing for her release under the Twitter campaign #FreeStellaNyanzi. Patricia
had been collecting money to cover the needs of her children; Sue was mainly engaged
with online efforts. In these first instances, I started grasping how the commitment to
sisterhood drove feminists to act in different ways. I was further inspired by the words of
Ms. Musiime, who made use of the term 'primary-response mechanism' to emphasise the
element of activism in the definition:

> 'In my understanding (…) Sisterhood is when there's an issue and a fellow woman
> stands up with another woman on that particular issue and (…) (*takes*) action on
> that issue. I think, for example, the people that provide the primary-response
> mechanisms to an issue are acting in sisterhood.'
>
> (Interview at the office, 27th February 2020)

The reaction of Sue and other feminists to the explosion of the #MeToo movement in
Uganda becomes a case in point. In the first days of 2020, several young women used their
Twitter accounts to denounce countless stories of young women who had suffered sexual
violence on the streets of Kampala. Sheena Bagaine, a university student, had been
particularly outspoken and facilitated her online space for anonymous women to share their
experiences, and denounce the perpetrators. In the light of this online earthquake, Sue
contacted different feminists and activists – both AMwA and non-AMwA related - to
organise a response quickly. This modus operandi resonates with the words of Pauline
Kahuubire, who had identified sisterhood with the capacity of small collectives, bonded by
personal relations and common ideology, to mobilise around issues of shared interest. In
this line, Rebecca Achom illustrated the compelling effect of this idea from her experience:

> 'So, everyone would refer to us like 'my sister'; you can't fail the sisters like that.
> So, I think like movement-building comes with (…) 'what is the issue?', 'do we

feel for that issue?', 'does it affect us the way it affects you?', and 'do I feel for it and understand it?'. Then, we can be organised around that part of that issue'

(Interview at the office, 5ᵗʰ March 2020)

The values of empathy and accountability reflected in this quote would be very present in the response of some collaborators of this research, who created a working group to support women who had suffered from sexual abuse. These efforts would culminate during my first week in the field when Sue organised a healing space for survivors with the support of AMwA and this network of feminists. However, it was the event of #FreeSheena that gave meaning and relevance to the sisterhood as a primary-response mechanism decisively.

#FreeSheena

WhatsApp: From media outlet to activist headquarters

When I activated my Internet data on the evening of 20th February, my phone started buzzing suddenly with messages. Some of my collaborators had received a WhatsApp message informing them of the arrest of a young woman called Sheena, whose release had been denied by the police. She was accused of the charges of cyberstalking, and offensive communication by one of the alleged perpetrators denounced for sexual violence on Twitter. Following this message, one of them called the members of the group 'to show some solidarity with Sheena on our socials' and 'pressure the police to release her.' The next morning, the following message would reach all groups of 'alumnae' of the organisation:
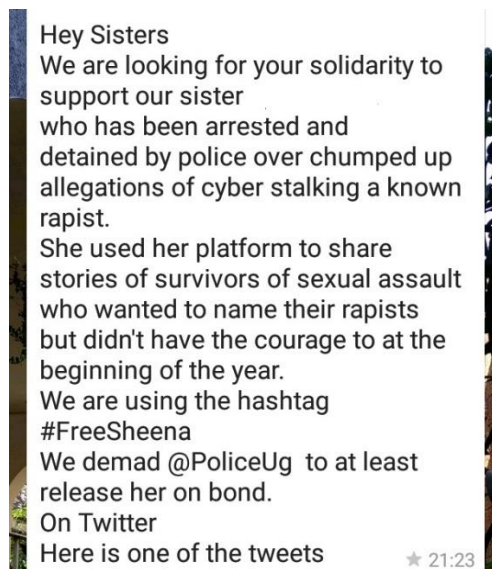

Hey Sisters
We are looking for your solidarity to support our sister
who has been arrested and detained by police over chumped up allegations of cyber stalking a known rapist.
She used her platform to share stories of survivors of sexual assault who wanted to name their rapists but didn't have the courage to at the beginning of the year.
We are using the hashtag #FreeSheena
We demad @PoliceUg to at least release her on bond.
On Twitter
Here is one of the tweets   ⭐ 21:23

Figure 10. WhatsApp message, 21ˢᵗ February 2020

In contrast with the previous discourse analysis, this message offers an example of how the discourse of sisterhood can be transformed into a call to action. Beyond the

appealing purpose in both instances, the term 'sister' is used in this case to awaken feminist fellows' commitment to stand up for other women. Doing so, the values of solidarity and accountability are put forward to demand their help to release Sheena, with a focus on online activism.

The response from the WhatsApp groups would not take long. One of the activists committed to going to the police station to support her and suggested organising the 'sisters' beyond social media. From these exchanges, we can appreciate how the informative uses of this platform can also be channeled to mobilise close networks for activism. To the extent allowed by the laws of the country – addressed in the final section-, we can see how feminists in Uganda were also encouraging physical mobilisation in combination with the virtual. According to Gil de Zúñiga et al., such employment of WhatsApp is a distinctive characteristic of younger generations of activists (2019, 5). Furthermore, young feminists complemented the informational and connective uses of this platform with organisational ones. It was precisely the network articulated by Sue in the light of the #MeToo movement on Twitter, the one that organised the response to Sheena's arrest. According to one of the participants, the interactions between these activists took place online mostly, where they could contact each other despite the obstacles posed by the time or location. On this occasion, WhatsApp allowed them to use their private group as headquarters to mobilise their skills and resources and coordinate offline and online actions effectively. Following Bennett and Segerberg's theory (2012) quoted by Zúñiga et al. (2019), this case study evidences how the communicative structure of WhatsApp can be used to coordinate activism when offline possibilities are not readily at reach. In effect, I argue that young feminists used this platform to inform, connect, and engage different people and forms of protest into the objective of releasing Sheena.

Twitter: Hashtag Solidarity to #FreeSheena

My first reaction after reading the first WhatsApp messages was to open my Twitter application to find more information. Despite how late it was, I came across Sue and other women raising awareness about Sheena's arrest and demanding her release. By that time, they had already created the hashtag #FreeSheena to channel and spread the online campaign. In effect, the next morning, I just needed to click on the hashtag to keep updated with the latest developments. This event showed the trend of younger feminists and activists of using the hashtag for activism purposes (Chen, Pain and Barner 2018), facilitating the spread of campaigns at unprecedented speed and scales. These online efforts were strongly linked to the idea of feminist solidarity, as shown by the WhatsApp message analysed above. I argue here that the discourse of sisterhood was personally

adopted and effectively used on Twitter to connect and mobilise young women, in particular. The following Tweets are illustrative of such efforts:

Figure 11. #FreeSheena Tweets, 21ˢᵗ February 2020

This experience also offers relevant insights to the debate around the effectiveness of social media as a substitute for conventional forms of activism in the African continent (Mutsvairo, 2016). Early that morning, I crossed Kampala by *boda-boda*[2] to join Sue and other feminists at the police station. When I arrived, there were already some people supporting Sheena and pushing for her release. As the morning progressed, other activists and even TV media houses arrived at the station to support her or find out more about her case. It was not surprising: By midday, the hashtag #FreeSheena had become a trending topic in Uganda. In this case, the hashtag campaign had been effective not only in terms of virtual engagement but also offline mobilisation (Bosch 2016). It allowed the convergence of both forms of activism, which mounted considerable public attention on the event, and thus, pressure on the police. In effect, some hours later, Sheena was released on police bond.

The success of #FreeSheena illustrates the use of Twitter as a capable vehicle to reach young audiences and encourage their citizen engagement regardless of time or location (Bosch 2016). Furthermore, the political agency exercised here contributed to raising

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[2] Motorbike in Luganda, one of the local languages spoken in the central and southern regions of the country.

awareness about the situation of human rights in the country and nurturing the feminist movement online. This event resonates with the experience of Jamia Wilson, a young Black feminist who shared in the *Online Revolution Convening* the following words: 'When I measure the impact of my work, it really comes from watching one person's action or one small group's action become contagious courage, and to grow into movement building' (Martin and Valenti 2012, 10). Even though online activism might not always be so effective, this case study illustrates the potential of Twitter as a platform that contributes to 'social justice, political resistance, and empowerment for women' (Chen et al. 2018, 198). The image of Sue and Sheena reading together the virtual flow of solidarity brings these words into life.

An oppressive status quo on the ropes

'Given the fact that we continue to live in a very repressive state, in a state of deprivation, impoverishment, the sisterhood has been quite effective on those areas. So, in terms of repression, sisterhood and solidarity is what has kept activists going. Otherwise, many would be collapsing out of the weight of engagement and activism'
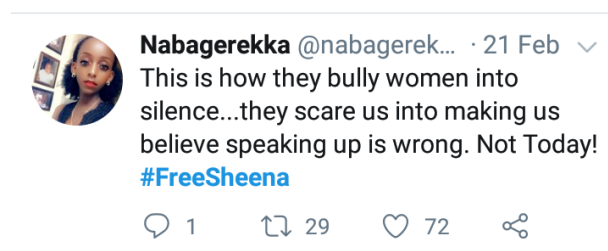
(Eunice Musiime, Interview, 27th February 2020)

It was no coincidence that the charges behind Sheena's arrest were the same that imprisoned Stella Nyanzi. Ironically, the same day the former was held prisoner, the latter was released after an eighteen-month incarceration. In both cases, the Computer Misuse Act (2011) was used to justify the detentions, which, beyond contextual differences, punished the same offence: That of upsetting the status quo. From a political perspective, this law had expanded the scope of the Public Order Management Act (2013) or POMA, which provided the police with 'sweeping powers to arbitrarily prevent or stop public gatherings (…) and to crack down on protests', according to Amnesty International (2020)3. In this context, it is not surprising that citizens feel generally discouraged from engaging with issues of a political nature. In this regard, some collaborators expressed high frustration towards the general lack of initiative of Ugandans to show their discontent.

However, for women, the limitation of civil rights and liberties cannot only be understood in narrow political terms. The fear imposed by these laws affects the personal capacity of women to challenge sexist social norms not only at the highest spheres but also in their closest environments. According to the Uganda Police Force's annual crime report,

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[3] On the 26th March, the Uganda's Constitutional Court declared Section 8 of POMA illegal and unconstitutional (Amnesty International 2020)

quoted by Ssenkaaba (2017), the cases of gender-based violence reported and investigated increased 4% from 2015 to 2016, making a total of 40,258 at the end of the year. From the new cases reported between those years, only 57% punished the perpetrator. The author explains that this impunity is favoured by current ineffective laws and 'unsafe' police environments, which discourage women from reporting and prevent further harm. The celebration of the Women's March came to challenge this state of affairs. Between 2017 and 2018, Kampala and its surroundings were shaken by the assassination of 42 women, which were not followed by any police investigation. A group of activists headed by Stella Nyanzi planned several protests to draw attention to these crimes and protest the State's lack of action. Confronting the political and legal obstacles, they finally managed to organise a multitudinous march, which became the first legal protest after the POMA was enacted (UFF 2018). I could not count the times this event came to the mouth of my collaborators, who considered it a milestone in the fight for human and women's rights in the country. However, beyond the exceptionality of this event, the situation seems to remain largely unchanged. Once again, the institution of the police becomes illustrative of this regard. At the beginning of this year 2020, a renowned senior officer publicly blamed women who suffer sexual assault for dressing indecently and grossly 'disorganising' men (Kayima 2020).

In this context, the #MeToo movement in Uganda exploded on Sheena's Twitter account. For Sue, this event was an expression of what she had termed 'Twitter Justice'. She argued that, in the face of a failing legal system, social media had helped survivors to make their voices heard and protect other women through the diffusion of perpetrators' identities. However, this engagement did not come for free. Before her arrest, Sheena denounced on Twitter the threats and violent language used against her in the wake of the event. Furthermore, she would be brought to Court for defamation charges later. Her case confirms the increasing trend of online and offline backlash that affects feminists across the world analysed by Carson (2018). In this case, the employment of the Computer Misuse Act shed light on the fact that in Uganda, silencing is not only socially encouraged but also state promoted (Kagumire 2020)

Nabagerekka @nabagerek… · 21 Feb
This is how they bully women into silence…they scare us into making us believe speaking up is wrong. Not Today! #FreeSheena

💬 1   ↺ 29   ♡ 72   ⤳

Kemiyondo @Kemi_yondo · 20 Feb

Women get raped. No arrests.
Women get killed. No arrests.
Women get harassed. No arrests.
Woman speaks up. Woman Arrested.

The police should be ashamed of
themselves for using their power to
silence us instead of protecting us.
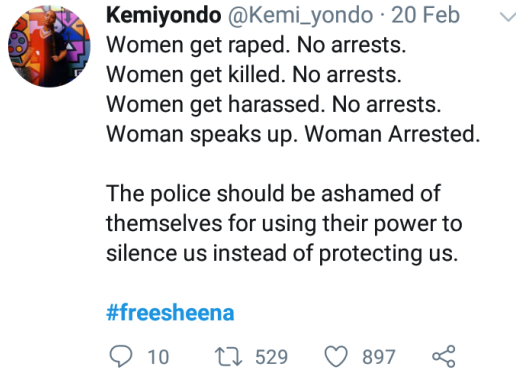
#freesheena

💬 10   🔁 529   ♡ 897   ⤶

Figure 12. #FreeSheena Tweets denouncing violent silencing, 21st February 2020.

The movement around #FreeSheena stood as a reaction to this national state of affairs. Similarly, it confirmed the trend observed by the Rwandan activist Giramata, who asserts the increasing relevance of Twitter for feminists in the Eastern Africa region as the space to mobilise, organise, and resist violence (AMwA 2020). In this case, the engine of sisterhood pushed online by feminists on Twitter and WhatsApp was instrumental for Sheena's release. Rosebell Kagumire, a feminist journalist and one of the leading promoters of the #FreeSheena, expressed the relevance of this phenomenon:

'So, the idea of 'I can work for you, without even meeting you', for me, that is very important in many ways. That breaks down, that already tells you that people can create trust without even meeting (…) You find that we have a much more variety of people from different backgrounds, doing different things, but coming together when it is necessary'

(Rosebell Kagumire, Interview at her office, 9th March 2020)

In conclusion, I have developed the idea of sisterhood as a primary-response mechanism to examine why and how young Ugandan feminists engage with activism in the country. From this perspective, the commitment to sisterhood becomes the source for feminists to come together and organise in collective action to respond to emerging issues affecting women's rights. Drawn from the examples of the #MeToo movement in Uganda and the subsequent #FreeSheena campaign is the analysis of the use of social media to exercise and amplify the scope of their political agency. The tendency of organising online to circumvent the constraints of conventional forms follows the current waves of feminist organising across the region and the world. This chapter outlines some of the reasons attributed to the emergence of this trend in the context of Uganda. On the one hand, the case of #FreeSheena evidences the benefits of social media as a tool to inform, connect, and mobilise support at unprecedented speed and scales. Far from being exclusive, the digital is becoming the organising platform to coordinate and encourage offline actions, evidencing complementarity rather than substitution as the key to achieving effective results. To this purpose, the language of sisterhood becomes critical. This case

demonstrates how the discourse is used as a tool to awaken the political commitment of feminists to solidarity and involve them with others with the cause. On the other hand, the increasing trend of online activism is motivated by the limited possibilities of physical mobilisation and protest in the country. The last section analyses the instrumentalization of laws to impose silence on Ugandans, with a focus on the effects on women. It shows that such a political atmosphere restricts their capacity to challenge sexism and discrimination in their lives further. In this context, young Ugandans are developing new alliances and innovative ways to make their voices heard in the face of shared injustice. All in all, the case of #FreeSheena evidences a practice of sisterhood that embodies solidarity and collective action and pushes women's agency forward.

Chapter 8. Concluding thoughts

Figure 13. Walking down the streets of Ntinda town, Kampala. 27th January 2020

Along the thesis, I have explored the ways young women are developing and enhancing their capacity for transformative action within the context of Kampala. Firstly, I centred the investigation on the long history of women-led resistance in Uganda, focusing on the trends and accomplishments of the women's movement in the 1990s. This historical overview allowed us to have a first taste of the challenges brought by the latest wave of conservatism and militarisation in the country from the early 2000s. In this context, the current feminist movement emerged to sustain previous achievements, engage broader audiences, and revitalise the cause. Then, I explored the principles of the African feminist thought, which nurtures and connects feminists' actions across the continent. Following this theoretical outline, I addressed the latest developments of feminist organising in the region, with a special focus on Uganda. Following the thesis approach, I highlighted the increasing participation of the youth, the use of social media, and the presence of the idea of sisterhood as part of movement-building strategies. After addressing in chapter three the particularities of fieldwork and its methodological implications, I dived into the empirical section of the thesis guided with the following overarching questions: *Why does the idea and practice of 'sisterhood' enhance the individual political agency of young feminist women in urban Uganda? How are young feminists employing social media in their practice of feminism and sisterhood? Why is the discourse of sisterhood relevant in such processes?*

The fourth chapter invites us to discover the motives behind the involvement of young Ugandan women in the feminist cause. Following Hemming's approach (2012) and Keller's theory (2015), I analyse the influence of lived experiences and social media in Sue and Patricia's later engagement with feminism. In this regard, the presence of the collective, both offline and online, seems critical in igniting their predisposition to solidarity and desires of change. Furthermore, the dynamics of the virtual environment offer a stark contrast with the offline setting of Kampala, where social conservatism poses an obstacle to engage with feminist concerns. Tracing back the sources of this environment, I encountered the Christian churches in their role of guardians of public morality in society. Exploring their influence on the daily lives of Sue and Patricia, we come across a certain level of tension resulting from their Christian and feminist identities. Yet, their experiences are illustrative of the creativity used to challenge sexism from inside religious institutions, while acknowledging them an essential part of themselves. In chapter five, Sue and Patricia accompanied us in an elaboration of the notion of sisterhood. Their experience shows sisterhood as the strategy and goal to dismantle patriarchal structures through political solidarity amongst women. At this point, one starts to grasp that, while their drive for change becomes politicised through the feminist theory, the elements of community and collective power enhance it. In fact, the process of transformation these young women go through is shared and reaffirmed in a group. As such, a new sense of self and purpose in society emerges from this process, which becomes embodied by a community bonded by feminist politics and identity.

In chapters six and seven, I analysed the practice of this notion within the context it is acted upon. In the former, I explored the dynamics of sisterhood within close networks of activists. While WhatsApp is used as a 'safe space' to reproduce the dynamics of collective care and awareness-raising, the language of sisterhood reaffirms their connection as feminists. The creation of these systems of mutual support becomes especially meaningful in a context where the censorious trend against sexual rights and liberties places feminists at risk of social rejection. In response to the opposition and incomprehension from closer circles, feminist networks of solidarity stand as an alternative system supporting activists in their endeavour. Then, in chapter seven, I examined the practice of feminist solidarity in Uganda from a perspective of activism. Using the concept of primary-response mechanism, this last section illustrated the formation of networks of activists that react to situations of injustice and violence affecting women. The examination of the event of #FreeSheena illustrated the potential of digital activism in Uganda, asserting complementarity with offline actions rather than substitution. To do so, the use of feminist discourse proved essential. In this case, the language of sisterhood became a critical tool to awaken feminists' commitment to solidarity and engage broader audiences with the cause. Finally, the relevance of these networks is analysed within the socio-political and legal constraints of Uganda. The study shows that, in a context where women's silence is not only socially

encouraged, but state promoted, the exercise of collective action becomes indispensable to challenge oppressive systems.

All in all, this research integrates a feminist perspective to the study of political agency and structure in urban Africa in the 21st century. It is my hope that, through the notion of sisterhood, I have been able to unveil the importance of the collective at the core of our human capacity of transformation. Reminding us that the individual self cannot be disassociated from the collective brings us back to the dateless lore of Ubuntu, which emphasises common bonds over differences. In this case, the feminist ideal inspires these aspects from a perspective of solidarity but also care and commitment, values that become essential to navigate through the uncertainty of our days. Still, these are also the times that allow us to build community and bring about social change in new ways, against all the odds.

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