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Building a Pan-African Feminist Peace

Toni Haastrup

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers an original and critical intervention into contemporary peace and security debates by centering African feminist perspectives within Pan-Africanism. It challenges dominant militaristic and patriarchal paradigms that have undermined the liberatory potential of Pan-Africanism and perpetuated cycles of violence and insecurity. The brief insists on a feminist reconfiguration of Pan-African peacebuilding initiatives, positioning feminist knowledge as central to disrupting patriarchal violence and colonial legacies.

The research that underpins this brief contributes to rethinking peace and security from a feminist Pan-Africanist perspective, advocating for a shift from state-centric, militarised approaches to those that prioritize human security, dignity, and justice for marginalised communities. It foregrounds the critical role of African feminist activism and knowledge production, particularly through frameworks like the Maputo Protocol and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, which have the potential to reshape peace interventions on the continent.

The brief draws from African feminist scholarship, decolonial theorising, and illustrative cases to offer a critique of the failures of institutionalised Pan-Africanism and provides actionable recommendations that are theoretically robust and practically relevant for policymakers, civil society actors, and regional institutions.

Key Points

- ▶ Militarism and patriarchy undermine Pan-Africanism and Peace Efforts: The institutionalization of Pan-Africanism has been compromised by patriarchy, which fuels militarism and political violence. Moreover, global power hierarchies continue to enable conflicts on the continent, reinforcing structural violence and insecurity.
- ▶ A Feminist Pan-Africanist Approach is Needed for Sustainable Peace: A feminist-informed Pan-Africanism would centre the well-being and security of marginalised communities, challenging patriarchal and colonial structures that perpetuate violence.
- ▶ Feminist Knowledges are Essential for Change: It is essential that the African Union (AU) and other governance structures in Africa must integrate feminist pan-Africanist principles. Drawing on frameworks like the Maputo Protocol, initiatives like Silencing the Guns need feminist reconfiguration to be more effective.

Introduction

Today, Africa faces a complex landscape of peace and security challenges. These challenges are arguably the result of different layers of violence inflicted on African peoples. At the root of these multiple forms of violence is the persistence of colonialityⁱ which undergirds the global political economy and the very function of the international system as it exists day. This version of the international is a Eurocentric one for which Pan-Africanism in its ideal offers a counternarrative. It has thus been described as a “framework for ... advancing peace, people-based democracy, and human rights remains as vital as ever for reclaiming citizen agency”ⁱⁱ

However, attempts to institutionalise Pan-Africanism has so far in failed inasmuch as it has become imbued with patriarchy, which drives militarism and is compromised by enduring global hierarchies. Former colonial powers and new actors reproduce. This in turn sustains physical violence, and political instability by reinforcing militarismⁱⁱⁱ despite policy interventions. The violence of coloniality makes peace harder to achieve and curtails the liberatory potential of Pan-Africanism. This brief argues that peace requires a reclaiming of Pan-Africanism that is informed by an African feminist orientation within and outside those institutions responsible for peace and security on the continent.

The Challenge

Wars and conflicts are main sources of violence and insecurity on the African continent. In Sudan for example, decades of civil war, culminating in the secession of South Sudan in 2011, have left deep scars on the nation. Despite the signing of a peace agreement in 2019, violence persists, stemming from militarism, economic grievances, and competition for resources. The humanitarian toll is staggering, with millions displaced requiring assistance. Similarly, Cameroon grapples with a crisis that has largely flown under the radar of global attention. The Anglophone regions of the country have been mired in conflict since 2016, as separatist groups seek independence from the Francophone-dominated government. The resulting violence has displaced hundreds of thousands and led to widespread human rights abuses. The government's heavy-handed response has only exacerbated the situation, underscoring the need for inclusive dialogue and a political solution to address the root causes of the conflict. Whether it is Boko Haram in Nigeria or Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in Niger, or Al-Shabab in Somalia, these non-state groups operate with impunity, exploiting porous borders and local grievances and weak governance to further their agenda of violence. The consequences

have been dire, not only for Niger but for the broader Sahel region, where instability threatens to spill over into neighbouring countries. These examples illustrate just a fraction of the physical and politically motivated violent threats facing Africa.

Beyond physical and political violence, the African continent also faces economic inequalities, and climate-induced crises, which are deeply rooted in the militarised. Militarism, as it exists has become the default mechanism to address crises,^{iv} perpetuating cycles of violence. For instance, the militarisation of resource governance has particularly devastating consequences. Moreover, those communities rich in natural resources such as crude oil, diamonds, and minerals remain the most marginalised, and most prone to experiencing economic and political violence. Militarism fuels a cycle of structural violence wherein experience of militarised responses result in displacement, forced migrations, and often deepens competition that causes further inequities. Meanwhile, militarism heightens the impacts of climate change—droughts, floods, and dwindling arable land, a particular challenge for African countries.^v

Inasmuch as Pan-Africanism seeks to highlight the deeply racialised and hierarchical nature of the status-quo, including militarism, it could be seen as offering solutions to ongoing challenges. Specifically, the African Union (AU) as the successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has sought to translate Pan-Africanism via the principles of unity, self-determination and collective security into policies that challenge coloniality and militarism.

Current Approach and its Shortcomings

Pan-Africanism, in theory, challenges racial capitalism, advocating for the empowerment and self-determination of Africans and afro-descent people worldwide.^{vi} It is “a sociopolitical worldview that seeks to restore the dignity and humanity of Africans – on the continent and elsewhere in the African diaspora – after centuries of oppression and exploitation.”^{vii} The idea of Pan-Africanism, therefore, potentially provides a framework for peace in Africa.^{viii} This is based on the idea that working together, Africans can find the solutions to their own challenges on the basis of self-determination and emancipation. As Tamale notes, Pan-Africanism is also praxis grounded in ideal of unity. The attempt to codify this ideal can be found in the AU’s Agenda 2063.^{ix}

However, this process of codifying – the institutionalisation of Pan-Africanism – has had

implications for its liberatory potential. According to author Nanjala Nyabola, “Pan-Africanism was kidnapped. Calls to unity were used to justify state violence and repression, to animate calls for blind loyalty to the state.”^x For Nyabola, Pan-Africanism in its evolution has legitimised the very violence that undermines the possibilities of peace and instead has become a structure of power deployed to terrorise Africans. This is an argument that has also been made by African feminists Amina Mama and Hakima Abbas.^{xi} In short, Pan-Africanism, in practice, has become Man-Africanism. Man-Africanism reifies male power to justify the persistence of violent conflicts, and the martial politics imposed in response to these insecurities. What has been consistent in the transition from the promise of Pan-Africanism to Man-Africanism is patriarchy.

Patriarchy is a social system where men hold power over all other marginalised groups. It relies on the subordination of women and other gender minorities through norms, laws and institutional practices. Inherent in every society it is legitimated by everyday practices and fundamentally challenges the opportunities for social justice. Patriarchy valorises aggression contributing to a culture that values militarism and the militarisation of societies. This militarisation reinforces the hierarchical structures that subordinate women. For the late feminist peace activist Cynthia Cockburn, it is patriarchal gender relations in their intersection with other power relations that perpetuate “a tendency to armed conflict in human societies”.^{xii}

It is thus unsurprising that powerful men, especially, utilise the language of liberation to institutionalise patriarchal values including in institutions such as the AU.^{xiii} Thus, even as the AU has responded to African and global imperatives to challenge patriarchy through the advocacy of feminist bureaucrats (femocrats); as well as the development of legal and normative frameworks like the Maputo Protocol,^{xiv} at the heart of institutionalised pan-Africanist praxis is the core principle of solidarity among powerful men. The implication of this is that even interventions such as peacebuilding are made difficult since they fail to tackle the root causes of insecurity and persistent violence and the conditions for continued coloniality.

To take one example is to explore the approach to the so-called War on Terror in Africa. The insurgencies of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and similar groups across the Sahel are often presented as existential threats requiring a militarised response. Patriarchal ideologies play a critical role, however in emphasising aggression and dominance as markers of strong leadership. This framing of the challenge sidelines non-violent approaches, such as addressing the root causes of the conflicts—poverty, exclusion, and marginalization—which are often dismissed (in practice, if not rhetorically) as ‘weak’ or ineffective. Leaders and security forces across the continent

are often pressured to showcase strength, equating it with the capacity for violence by more powerful external actors, reinforcing the interplay of coloniality with the patriarchal violence of militarism.

Patriarchal narratives often reinforce a binary of 'good' versus 'bad' actors which invariably dehumanises those deemed as threatening and their suspected communities. For instance, communities in the Sahel and northern Nigeria have been subject to collective punishment through airstrikes, forced displacements, or military crackdowns. These actions perpetuate cycles of violence including against women and children. Patriarchal ideologies that associate women with passivity and victimhood further exacerbate this, as women's suffering is used rhetorically to justify continued militarisation without addressing their broader structural vulnerabilities.

To recover the aspirations of Pan-Africanism as the blueprint for Africa's liberation then, undoing patriarchy is essential. Addressing patriarchy is a crucial step in tackling the root causes of violence in Africa because patriarchal norms and beliefs often perpetuate power imbalances that contribute to the prevalence of violence. Moreover, these thrive on the oppression of women. Studies have shown that states that uphold patriarchal values, restrictive gender norms, and power differentials are more likely to also value war and violence as a viable alternative to life.^{xv}

What Feminism Offers

Feminist peace researchers have provided a particular conceptualisation of violence as being on a continuum.^{xvi} In other words, feminists recognise the interconnectedness and persistence of various forms of violence, particularly those experienced by women and other marginalized groups across different contexts. This feminist approach posits that different forms of violence – from domestic violence to street violence including sexual and gender-based violence to institutional and political violence – are not isolated from each other because they are perpetuated by the same underlying structures of power and oppression. These structures of power are patriarchal and militaristic. And as African feminists have further identified, they are colonial and informed by racial capitalism. In effect, feminism identifies the antagonist to peace as hetero-patriarchal control and power.^{xvii}

The idea of the continuum of violence highlights that violence is not just about individual acts but is also deeply embedded and normalised across all societal institutions.^{xviii} In short, norms, legal, economic and cultural systems tooted in patriarchy contribute to and sustain violence in all its forms.

A feminist interruption of current practices of Pan-Africanism, however, emphasises the importance of **resistance** and **agency** to challenge oppression.^{xix} Indeed, despite the reproduction of the feminist erasures within the pan-Africanist movements whether by the extent of Man-Africanism or the 'forgetting' of women's contributions, the movement has been informed by feminist insights.^{xx} Informed by African feminisms, a feminist interruption proposes an alternative vision of peace that demands the interrogation of historic structures of oppression and their contemporary violent manifestations.^{xxi}

The idea of feminism informing Pan-Africanism is not new,^{xxii} neither is the linkage to peace. Yet, the recovery of these linkages is especially urgent. With its emphasis on intersectionality a feminist informed pan-Africanist approach to peace recognises that experiences of violence are shaped by the ways in which various oppressive structures impact differently on Africans depending on their multiple and intersecting identities like race, class, sexuality, gender, ability, and nationality. This perspective helps in understanding how different forms of oppression compound the experiences of violence.

Beyond providing a framework of understanding however, this feminist Pan-Africanism is rooted in praxis that seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures that perpetuate oppression including the violent structures that undergird insecurity in Africa. Efforts to do this have come through feminist activism across the African continent. For example, in Sudan, feminists were on the forefront of protests for peace and change, away from authoritarianism that led to the downfall of the dictator Al-Bashir. Feminist and women's coalitions have been instrumental to keeping Sudan within the global discourses for peace in their call for the end to the most recent war as well as drawing attention to the gendered dimensions of conflict.^{xxiii}

There has of course been incremental feminist entry into the peace and security space through frameworks like the *Maputo Protocol, the recently adopted Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (AUCEVAG)*,^{xxiv} and the AU's broader commitments to the implementation of the global framework on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), whose four pillars: prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery are already established. These formal practices of feminist interventions towards Pan-Africanism goals have challenged cultures of patriarchal violence, with broader implications for shifting cultural norms.^{xxv} Yet, although several countries have adopted *Maputo* and even ratified it, there are still several reservations that undermine its efficacy. Moreover, implementation is very weak as there is no serious accountability mechanism.

Radical transformation requires radical interventions.

As such there is a need to move beyond these incremental changes that often end up co-opting feminist principles into the status quo. A bolder approach that directly names and challenges the reification of patriarchal power relations through a commitment to social justice is required.

Recommendations

In accounting for a feminist intervention that seeks a return to the aspirations of Pan-Africanism not its post-independence codified imitation via Man-Africanism, policymakers must embrace an African feminist informed worldview that acknowledge historical injustices while promoting inclusive, equitable, and sustainable strategies for peace in Africa.

A feminist pan-African lens means centring African women's experiences and perspectives, acknowledging the specific contexts of African societies, and promoting their knowledge and leadership to challenge "hetero-patriarchal capitalist power"^{xxvi} as a pathway to peace. Consequently, existing institutions must interrogate politics as usual of African states, international donors who make up the global governance regime of peace and security and consider:

1. Institutional reforms should be undertaken so that they systematically incorporate feminist principles of inclusion. Ongoing debates about the reforms of the AU and the United Nations provide important entry points to consider feminist demands for women's greater representation; the representation of minoritised communities' perspectives in institutional planning and design. Moreover, policies that emerge should engage with African feminist knowledge making and its challenge to militarism and coloniality as the basis of the structural violence experienced across the continent.
2. In the AU context, the *Silencing the Guns* initiative, which in part aimed to challenged increased militarisation has stalled in large part because it relied on patriarchal ideologies that helped to justify the use of violence in some contexts leading to the acceptance of martial politics across the continent. A reconfiguration of *Silencing the Guns* through a feminist lens would be essential to a feminist informed pan-Africanist vision of peace on the African continent.
3. Governance in Africa tends to be very top down and often champions hegemonic masculinity. A feminist approach challenges this model of status quo governance by advocating for more inclusive approaches to governance informed

by a pan-African feminist ethos. For example, policymaking that prioritises participatory approaches can ensure that those often excluded from governance processes inform decision making challenging persistent coloniality and hetero-patriarchal power. These approaches also help communities work together rather than foster adversarial engagements. Such an approach is able to challenge the tendency towards martial politics.

4. It is necessary to develop mechanisms for monitoring and accountability of those frameworks and initiatives that already engender feminist principles. In the same way that the Office of the Special Envoy for WPS has developed the Continental Results Framework to monitor the adoption and implementation of the WPS agenda, the Maputo Protocol would benefit from the same. In addition to being enacted in the spirit of Pan-Africanism, regular public reporting on progress towards implementation which challenges coloniality and seeks gender equality will promote transparency and allow for public scrutiny and engagement on peace initiatives.
5. Upskilling in Feminist Knowledge making is essential: For many, feminism is a taboo concept. Moreover, there is a tendency to frame feminism as foreign to Africa and African projects. In order to challenge this, engagement with African feminist and rights organisations on the continent is essential. These entities have been doing the work of inclusion, including feminist peacebuilding^{xxvii} and have the expertise to lead change on the continent. Often, they have a deep understanding of the local dynamics that give rise to various insecurities and are able to mobilise communities for change. Insights from these feminists can be deployed to a range of stakeholders, especially decisionmakers.

Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toni Haastrup is a professor and Chair in Global Politics in the School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester. She is an internationally recognised feminist scholar, pioneering research on feminist foreign policy, Africa-EU relations, race and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Her recent works broadly interrogate how global hierarchies of power and oppression shape peace and security globally. Beyond academia, she has worked with institutions of global governance offering feminist insights into policymaking. Recognised with numerous awards, including the Emma Goldman Award, her work continues to shape critical discourse on inclusive, just global governance. The research underpinning this contribution was funded by the International Social Research Foundation Mid-Career Fellowship (2023-2025).

Contact: toni.haastrup@manchester.ac.uk



Institute for Peace and Security Studies - IPSS
Addis Ababa University - AAU

ppP.O.Box: 1176
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
T + 251 (1) 11 245 660
E info@ipss-addis.org
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SOAS Address: SOAS University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK

E cpas@soas.ac.uk
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