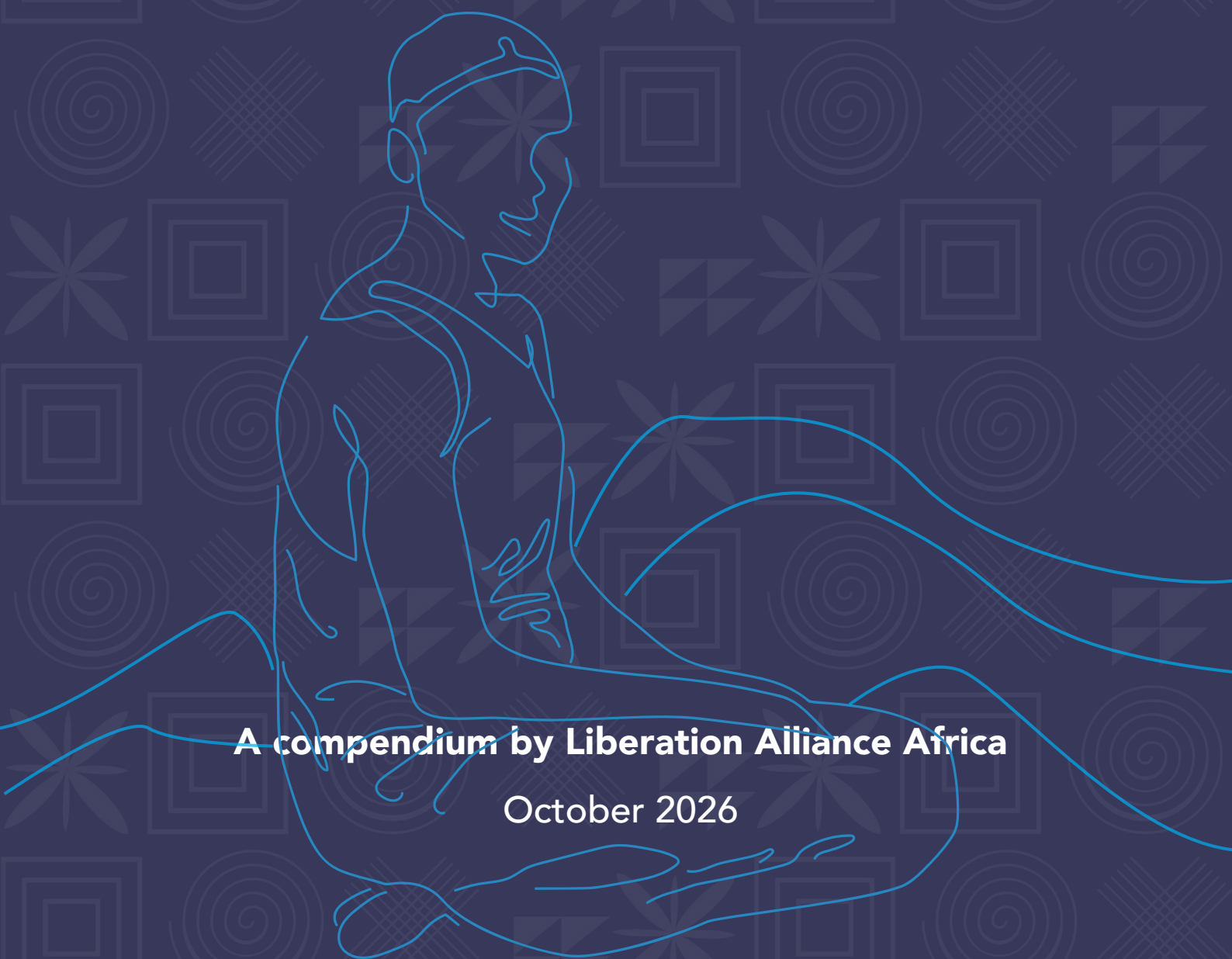




Liberation Alliance
Africa

Recentring African Feminist Epistemologies in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response

Critical inquiry Two: Coloniality of Sexual
Violence: Gender, Power, Sovereignty, and the
Neo-Colonial State



A compendium by Liberation Alliance Africa

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Introduction

Sexual violence against women and girls in Africa remains a profound violation of personhood and human rights, with far-reaching consequences for survivors, families, and communities. Feminist movements, women's rights organisations, and survivor-led initiatives across the continent have long worked to prevent and respond to this violence, building bodies of practice-based knowledge that predate, and often exceed, the frameworks through which international actors have come to understand sexual violence on the continent. In recent decades, this landscape has also come to include a growing presence of state, donor, and internationally funded interventions. While these efforts have increased visibility and resources for prevention and response, they frequently operate within development, humanitarian, and governance frameworks shaped by imperialist, colonial, and extractive power relations—relations that this compendium has engaged in its line of enquiries.

Liberation Alliance Africa's founding position paper, [Recentring African Indigenous Knowledge to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence](#), examined three interconnected critical enquiries toward a decolonial feminist approach to sexual violence in Africa: an audit of the knowledge systems currently governing sexual violence prevention and response; an interrogation of the role of hetero-patriarchal colonial capitalism and the complicity of neo-colonial states in producing and sustaining gendered violence; and a centring of indigenous and endogenous knowledge systems as practice-based knowledge for reimagining prevention, response, healing, accountability, and collective safety.

This compendium is the extended work of that founding paper. Where the position paper laid out these three enquiries as a shared foundation, each of the three briefs gathered here takes each inquiry as a site of epistemological provocation, moving from tensions to liberatory dreams.

This work emerges, as the position paper did, from the Building Knowledge Bridges Community of Practice convened by Liberation Alliance Africa, which brought together African Indigenous Knowledge holders, feminist researchers, organisers, and women's rights activists. The three briefs are the product of that same collective process of shared reflection, dialogue, and knowledge production, sustained now across a longer period of collaborative writing, argument, and revision.

About This Compendium

This compendium comprises three briefs, each corresponding to one of the position paper's three critical enquiries, and each building on the analysis that precedes it.

Brief One, *Social Reproduction, Political Economy and the Militarisation of Sexual Violence* takes up the paper's first inquiry. Opening with an account of the impunity written into Kenya's Defence Cooperation Agreement with the United Kingdom, the brief develops a social reproduction analysis of how neocolonial economic relationships displace the costs of capitalism onto women's bodies and labour; traces the specific political economy of debt, structural adjustment, and austerity that manufactures the material conditions for gendered violence; and examines how the militarisation of African states, from electoral violence in

Kenya to the securitised mining and agro-industrial zones of Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, extends into the global securitisation of sexual violence itself as its own extractive economy. It closes by asking how a state that was built through extraction, and that remains bound by the debt and donor conditions documented in this brief, realistically meets its obligation to prevent violence that those same relationships help create.

Brief Two, *Coloniality of Sexual Violence: Gender, Power, Sovereignty, and the Neo-Colonial State*, takes up the paper's second inquiry. The brief traces the coloniality of gender as a theoretical foundation, examines the political economy of the gendered postcolonial state and the dual legal systems it inherited from colonial rule, and develops an extended analysis of sovereignty: showing that violence is constitutive of African state formation rather than incidental to its failures. The brief further established that sexual violence functions as a means through which states with contested legitimacy restore their authority, and that women's resistance to the state, whether legal, political, or discursive, is met with a consistent pattern of backlash across contexts as different as colonial administration, post-independence courts, and post-revolutionary transitional justice.

Brief Three, *Epistemic Sovereignty in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response*, takes up the paper's third inquiry. Building directly on Brief Two's argument that political sovereignty over one's own body and safety is already compromised by the state, by donors, and by NGO bureaucracy, this brief asks where else sovereignty might be practised, and argues for epistemic sovereignty. The brief invites the field of sexual violence to adopt epistemic sovereignty in its analysis of sexual violence on the continent. Liberation Alliance Africa explains how epistemic sovereignty can be made and sustained through three practices: feminist archiving, critical consciousness, and community accountability. It closes by naming six liberatory shifts required to move sexual violence work on the continent from a decolonial feminist commitment to a decolonial feminist practice.

Through this work, we aim to do the following:

- Raise public consciousness on the urgency of decolonising thought and practice in the field of sexual violence prevention and response.
- Contribute to empirically grounded, historically informed approaches that reevaluate the sexual violence continuum and orient toward African feminist liberation rather than containment or control.
- Lay the foundation of a decolonial, anti-colonial, and Indigenous framework on understanding, preventing, and responding to sexual violence, which detaches sexual violence as a development initiative but centres it as a critical site of decolonisation and decoloniality.

Critical Enquiry Two: Coloniality of Sexual Violence: Gender, Power, Sovereignty, and the Neo-Colonial State

Preamble

Sexual violence in Africa cannot be separated from the question of the state. African feminist thought has long understood this. Amina Mama's work on militarism and the gendered politics of military rule, Patricia McFadden's critique of the nationalist state as a patriarchal project, Oyeronke Oyewunmi's account of how colonial rule imposed gender categories, Sylvia Tamale's analysis of law, sexuality and decolonisation, and Lyn Ossome's writings on the political economy of the state and social reproduction have together established that the neo-colonial African state is neither neutral nor new.¹ It carries violence forward in its institutions, its laws,

and its relationships with the people it governs. This brief explores and builds on this African feminist body of work.

The tensions we sit with in this critical enquiry lie in the gap between theorising and the current frameworks that shape how we articulate violence and prevention practices. Most programming on sexual violence on the continent is designed within, and funded through, international development and human rights institutions. These liberal institutional approaches present sexual violence primarily as a relational problem between individual perpetrators and individual victims, to be solved through legal reform, awareness campaigns, and service provision. In this framing, the state appears as the guarantor of protection, a neutral arbiter mediating between those gendered as men and those gendered as women, while erasing those at the margins. This work holds that this framing of sexual violence is not simply a mistake and it bears serious consequences. It erases non-normative genders and ways of being and obscures how racial capitalist modernity produced gender in the first

1. Amina Mama, "Khaki in the Family: Gender Discourses and Militarism in Nigeria," *African Studies Review* 41, no. 2 (1998): 1–17; Patricia McFadden, "Becoming Postcolonial: African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship," *Meridians* 6, no. 1 (2005): 1–22; Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (Ottawa: Daraja Press, 2020); Lyn Ossome, "Imperialism and Crises of Social Reproduction in Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 51, no. 181 (2024): 515–530.

place. Additionally, it forgets that the gender binary is not a universal fact but, in many African contexts, a colonial imposition that displaced more fluid ways of organising social difference.²

A second gap concerns race. In analysis and intervention on sexual violence, racialisation in Africa is often treated as a feature of settler colonial contexts such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya and Algeria, where visible settler populations made racial hierarchy easy to see. Elsewhere, race is assumed to have departed with the colonial administrator. As a result, interventions frequently ignore how coloniality continues to operate within state functions and within the relationship between the state and its citizens. Yet racialisation took diverse forms across the continent: through indirect rule and the invention of “tribe”, through the legal classification of “natives”, through missionary education, and through the positioning of African economies as reservoirs of raw materials and cheap labour.³

None of these forms of racialisation required a settler population in order to endure. This brief therefore treats race as a significant marker that continues to distort the political, social and economic realities of African peoples, including in states never classified as settler colonies. Read in this light, sexual violence, a persistent phenomenon in the lives of African children, women, and queer and gender-diverse people, cannot be understood apart from the neo-colonial state. This state does not merely bear traces of the colonial era. It remains a receptacle of imperial interests, both at the material level and the social

level.

The evidence that sexual violence is structural rather than incidental is visible across the continent. African postcolonial states have been unable to tackle historic gendered harms and, in many cases, perpetuate them. The contradiction is sharpest where states celebrated as exemplars of democratic participation, such as South Africa, fare little better on sexual violence than states such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose political landscape has long been marked by the absence of legitimate civic engagement. Sexual violence permeates military states, neoliberal states, theocratic states and mono-ethnic states alike. Regime type does not explain it. We are therefore compelled to interrogate the state itself, and its profound inability, or perhaps refusal, to attend to sexual violence.

To do so, we must account for how the state came to take its present form. African states are configurations of diverse imperial impositions alongside internal contestations. Several non-European imperial projects predated and shaped state formation long before European contact: Egypt’s colonisation of Nubia in what is today southern Egypt and northern Sudan, the expansion of Aksum from present-day Ethiopia into the Horn of Africa and across the Red Sea, the Arab-Islamic expansion across North Africa, and the Sahelian empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay, which brought dozens of communities under their rule.⁴ The political history of the continent is one of plural and contested sovereignties, a history this brief returns to in Section Three.

2. Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press

3. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

4. Ibid.

The modern colonial order was distinguished by its organisation of domination through race. And this began before the Berlin Conference. By 1884, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had forcibly transported more than twelve million Africans across nearly four centuries, while the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades had operated for longer.⁵ Slavery is central to any account of enduring violence. It rendered the Black body as property, made the sexual violation of enslaved women a routine instrument of ownership and reproduction, and supplied the economic foundations of European modernity that would later colonise the continent directly.⁶ The violence of slavery crystallised into colonial structures and carries on in the present. Race became the organising grammar of European modernity.

Modernity is often narrated as an intellectual achievement in law, science and the arts, yet it developed alongside, and through, coloniality. Enlightenment thought positioned the European man as the bearer of reason, rights and political maturity, and cast the colonised as savage, deviant and incapable of self-government. Europe placed itself at the centre of history, while the colonised were imagined as prehistoric, entering history only at the moment of conquest. This temporal hierarchy supplied the justification for the mythical “civilising mission”, and law, science and anthropology then naturalised it, presenting social differences as biological facts.⁷ What the European metropole

experienced as modernity, much of the world which was enslaved, trafficked, annexed and dispossessed experienced as violence and coloniality.

The Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885 formalised this logic. European powers, joined by representatives of the United States and the Ottoman Empire, apportioned a continent to which none of them belonged, opening it to conquest and extraction.⁸ In drawing borders, they colonised not only space but also time.⁹ The colonial states that followed had no claim to the consent of the colonised. They ruled through a forceful, bifurcated legal order that separated citizens from subjects, and through the codification of custom and “tribe”.¹⁰ The postcolonial state inherited this apparatus.

State infrastructure, law and governance institutionalised colonial patriarchy, the legacies of enslavement and the dehumanising logics of conquest. These articulations of sovereign authority persisted both despite and because of nationalist independence movements. Those movements were the culmination of legitimate, collective and revolutionary liberatory praxis, but the political imaginaries they birthed were limited in scope. They largely took on the scaffoldings of power, culture and subject formation built by the colonial class. Masculinist nationalist movements absorbed the aspirations and labour of peasants, workers and women while building states fundamentally incapable of resolving

5. SlaveVoyages, “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database,” <https://www.slavevoyages.org>.

6. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17:colonised’s consenta, no. 2 (1987): 65–81.

7. Tayyab Mahmud, “Colonialism and Modern Constructions of Race: A Preliminary Inquiry,” *University of Miami Law Review* 53, no. 4 (1999): 1219–1246.

8. Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: The White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 239–55.

9. Achille Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the Move,” in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1–23.

10. Mamdani, Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

the question of gender in Africa.¹¹ Whether purposefully or inadvertently, they advanced a masculine state machinery, itself shaped by violent tribalisation and ethnicisation as the locus of power. The state produces violent and militarised masculinities through patriarchal institutions, social conditioning and economic disenfranchisement. It penalises masculinity mainly when its violence is directed at elites or at the state itself and rewards it if it helps in subjugating women and social and political minority groups. Section two develops this argument.

The extraction of value from Black bodies, labour and resources requires not only the maintenance of a hegemonic global order but also a disavowal of the sovereign being and subjectivity of African peoples. The state reproduces this disavowal by maintaining a monopoly on violence that it exercises disproportionately on the poor, the young, the disabled and the otherwise gendered, through structural neglect, the subtle force of institutions and open brutality. In doing so, it reproduces the social and political conditions, patriarchy and misogyny among them, that shape gendered and racialised subjectivities, and it sustains imperial hegemony.

As African feminists, we therefore situate our diagnosis of sexual violence within a broader field of state power, violence and white supremacy. This means attending to the myriad forms of violence faced by gendered African subjects, interrogating the investment of patriarchal power in a domineering state whose monopoly on violence serves global hegemons and a narrow African elite, and refusing the liberal diagnostic and remedial tools handed down by global funding institutions. Those tools preserve the Western status quo by evading the long history of colonialism, its effects on social relations among African peoples, and the ways the contemporary global order continues to sustain colonial violence.

The brief proceeds in three parts. Section One examines gender as a colonial architecture and the legal systems that institutionalised it. Section Two turns to masculinity, the militarised postcolonial state and what we call the symbolic power dilemma. Section Three asks what sovereignty means in the context of sexual violence.

Section I: Gender as a Colonial Architecture

When we write about the colonality of gender, we are not claiming that colonialism invented gender. We are claiming that it reconstructed how gender is understood, reorganised gender relations and restructured gender hierarchies. The postcolonial state then inherited and deepened this architecture. Colonial administrations rearranged and codified gender as a technique for managing and controlling native populations, and weaponised it to subordinate African women for the extraction of labour.

Coloniality is not simply the aftermath or residual form of colonial relations. It is a socio-historical configuration inaugurated as part of the larger colonial project of “invasion,

11. Amina Mama, “Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 46–62.

dispossession, expropriation and extermination", and sustained through racial capitalism.¹² A defining feature of this configuration is that relations between subjects are not horizontal but vertical. That is, some identities depict superiority over others.¹³ This hierarchy did not exist in precolonial African societies in the same way. While violence manifested itself in everyday African life in the form of wars of conquest, inter- and intra-community raiding, terrorism, criminality, rape, torture, maiming, and killing, it involved people of the same colour who were not permanently demarcated by what Santos (2007) termed Western "abyssal thinking" that underpinned colonial violence that was premised on "impossibility of the coexistence" between white colonisers and black colonised peoples.¹⁴ Colonial violence was racist from the onset because it dehumanised the colonised, thus giving the coloniser the upper hand to use violence to subjugate and impose order to prevent rebellion. It also marketed the idea that violence is in the interest of the colonised savages.¹⁵

During the pre-colonial era, African sociopolitical formations and ecologies of knowledge did not develop along what Maldonado-Torres (2007) termed the "racist/imperial Manichean misanthropic scepticism", whose essence was not only to doubt the very humanity of non-Western people but also to project them as "racialised and sexualized subjects" open to all sorts of violence including

enslavement, rape and genocide.¹⁶ Precolonial African socio-political formations allowed for the full incorporation and successful assimilation of defeated communities into the host society. But under colonial modernity, which organised identities through a racial order, whites could not be accommodated into the African societies they despised and sought to transform, and black people could not be accommodated into colonial white society that was fenced in by racism.

The socio-political formation took the form of what Mamdani termed a bifurcated colonial state formation of citizens and subjects.¹⁷ In this set-up of intersubjective relations, the colonisers used violence to keep the colonised in a subordinated position, forcing them to endure all forms of exploitation and abuse. In this section, we locate the coloniality of gender through the roots of violence against Africans and other colonised people within the expansion of colonial modernity, drawing on María Lugones's theory of the coloniality of gender, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's argument that gender was a colonial import into Yorùbá epistemology, Ifi Amadiume's work on Igbo gender systems, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's critique of both, Sylvia Tamale's work on customary law and sexuality, and Lyn Ossome's feminist political economy of the postcolonial state.¹⁸

12. Phipps, Alison. "The Coloniality of Sexual Violence." *Alison Phipps* (blog), February 21, 2026. <https://phipps.space/2026/02/21/coloniality/>.

13. Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). ON THE COLONIALITY OF BEING: Contributions to the development of a concept1. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 240-270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>

14. Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2007. "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 30 (1): 45-89.

15. Phipps, Alison. "The Coloniality of Sexual Violence." *Alison Phipps* (blog), February 21, 2026. <https://phipps.space/2026/02/21/coloniality/>.

16. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240-270.

17. Mamdani, Mahmood. 2006. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

18. María Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *Feminisms in Movement: Theories and Practices from the Americas*, ed. Laura De Souza Lima, Edgar Otero Quezada and Julia Roth (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023), 35-58; Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women; Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence," *Feminist Africa* 2 (2003): 8-24; Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011); Ossome, "Imperialism and Crises of Social Reproduction in Africa."

Race, Being and Gender

Aníbal Quijano's concept of the colonality of power captures how race became the organising logic of global capitalism. By sorting the world's population into racial and ethnic hierarchies, this system came to shape every dimension of social existence, and it did not dissolve with the dismantling of colonial administrations. It endures as one of the most pervasive forms of domination in the contemporary world, which helps to explain why independence left the structures of colonial violence largely intact.¹⁹

Nelson Maldonado-Torres extends this analysis through the concept of the colonality of being, which names the ontological wound produced by centuries of racialisation, enslavement and dehumanisation.²⁰ This concept is essential to understanding the enduring reproduction of sexual violence. Coloniality did not only organise who could own land or hold office; it organised whose humanity counted, and therefore whose bodies could be violated without consequence. The postcolonial state inherited this hierarchy of being, along with its institutions, and continues to express it in whose violation is investigated, whose testimony is believed, and whose suffering is recorded.

María Lugones builds on Quijano but breaks with him on a crucial point. Quijano treated race as the central colonial invention while leaving gender largely intact, as a pre-existing and universal binary onto which colonialism layered race. Lugones argues that this doesn't take into consideration

the impact of colonialism on the gender binary. The heterosexual, patriarchal gender system was itself a colonial imposition, co-constituted with race as part of the same classificatory violence that organised colonised populations for control and extraction.²¹ In her account, colonised peoples were not simply subordinated within an existing gender order. They were classified as savage and less than human, and within the colonial/modern gender system, to be gendered as "man" or "woman" was a mark of humanity. Colonised females were rendered available for labour and sexual violation precisely because they were denied the protections attached to European womanhood, a condition Hortense Spillers describes, in the context of slavery, as the "ungendering" of captive flesh.²²

At independence, nationalist elites claimed for men the full gendered humanity that colonialism had denied them, while the imposed subordination of women and other genders was largely left in place.

The Plurality of Gender and Colonial Reordering

African feminist scholars have made parallel and distinct arguments grounded in specific societies. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women* argues that pre-colonial Yorùbá social organisation, among a people whose homeland today straddles several West African states, was structured primarily around seniority rather than a male and female binary.²³ Seniority by birth order and familial structures guided social

19. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580.

20. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 240–270.

21. María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–219.

22. Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection*, Summer 1987, pp. 65–81.

23. Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women*; Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987)

roles, obligations, and access to authority. On her account, the rigid, biologically grounded category of “woman”, and the subordination attached to it, was a colonial import introduced through missionary Christianity, Western education and the colonial legal system.²⁴

Colonialism, in this reading, did not simply intensify a pre-existing patriarchy; it introduced the very category through which African women could be subordinated as a class. Chandra Mohanty describes this categorisation of women as a cultural and ideological composite constructed through colonial gaze and maintained by diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic). She explains that this re-presentation of “woman” produced by hegemonic discourses does not represent the direct identity of women as historical subjects but is an arbitrary construction under hegemonic logics.²⁵

Ifi Amadiume’s study of Nnobi society in south-eastern Nigeria makes a related argument: flexible institutions such as “male daughters” and “female husbands” allowed social roles and authority to be detached from sexed bodies, and these institutions were eroded by colonial rule and Christian conversion.²⁶

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf engages critically with these theses, arguing that we must take the historicity of gender categories seriously while attending to embodied experience. In every era, she contends, female bodies

were subjected to particular forms of control and violence. Holding these positions together requires recognising that pre-colonial Africa did not share a single gender order. Some societies were patrilineal. Others, among them the Akan of present-day Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire and the Chewa of Malawi, traced descent, and in many cases rights to land and office, through the mother’s line.²⁷

Some societies organised politics through dual-sex systems in which women held their own institutions of authority, as Kamene Okonjo documented among the western Igbo.²⁸ In the Asante state, the queen mother held a recognised constitutional role in selecting rulers. These were not egalitarian utopias. They had their own hierarchies of age, lineage, wealth and status. But they demonstrate that gender and authority were organised in many different ways.

Religious systems were equally central to how gender was lived and governed. Indigenous spiritual systems frequently conferred authority on women as priestesses, diviners and spirit mediums. Colonial witchcraft legislation and missionary campaigns often targeted these forms of authority as superstition. Missionary Christianity promoted the monogamous, male-headed household as a moral and civilisational ideal and made it a condition of education, employment and respectability. Islam, established in

24. Ibid

25. Chandra Talpade Mohanty *boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. (Spring - Autumn, 1984), pp. 333-358.

26. Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.

27. Stefano Boni, “Twentieth-Century Transformations in Notions of Gender, Parenthood, and Marriage in Southern Ghana: A Critique of the Hypothesis of ‘Retrograde Steps’ for Akan Women,” *History in Africa* 28 (2001): 15–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3172205>; Agnes Akosua Aidoo, “Women in the History and Culture of Ghana,” *Research Review (New Series)* 1, no. 1 (1985); Pauline E. Peters, “Our Daughters Inherit Our Land, but Our Sons Use Their Wives’ Fields’: Matrilineal-Matrilocal Land Tenure and the New Land Policy in Malawi,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4, no. 1 (2010)

28. Kamene Okonjo, “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria,” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 45–58.

North Africa, the Sahel and the Swahili coast centuries before European conquest, brought its own jurisprudence of family and gender, which colonial administrations frequently recognised, administered and codified selectively as personal status law or family law.

The outcome was not the simple replacement of one system by another, but the flattening of plural and contested gender orders, indigenous, Islamic and Christian, into a narrow binary and patriarchal template that could be written into law and administered by the state.

Dual Legal Systems: Customary and Civil Law as a Mechanism of Disadvantage

Colonial economies relied on the unpaid agrarian and reproductive labour of African women to subsidise the low wages paid to migrant men in mines, plantations and towns, as shown by Lyn Ossome's work.²⁹ With few exceptions, colonial administrations across Africa governed through a bifurcated legal system: modern civil law and customary law governing the private sphere of marriage, inheritance, and family relations. This dualism was the mechanism through which this gendered labour arrangement was institutionalised and remains an ongoing disadvantage for women.

Customary law continues to govern marriage, land, and inheritance for most women, particularly rural women, while postcolonial constitutions often exempt customary and personal law, explicitly or implicitly, from constitutional guarantees of

non-discrimination. Women can therefore hold formal constitutional equality on paper while remaining subject to a parallel legal order that denies them independent land rights, inheritance or the ability to leave abusive marriages. Sylvia Tamale reads this dualism as a deliberate structural feature that allows postcolonial states to retain low-cost control over women's labour and reproduction while presenting a modern, rights-compliant face internationally.³⁰

This dualism does not sit inert as an inherited structure but is actively defended whenever women attempt to use it. Erin Accampo Hern's comparative study of colonial court records in the Gold Coast and Senegal shows that women were sometimes able to win within these plural systems, leveraging the ambiguity between customary and civil law to secure inheritance rights in the Gold Coast and divorce in Senegal.³¹ Those wins produced backlash rather than settling the question.

In Senegal, women's growing recourse to colonial courts for divorce "alarmed both indigenous elites as well as colonial administrators", and the concern of French officials shifted from protecting women to "curbing their loose morals".³² After independence, when the 1972 Family Code codified broader rights, influential Muslim clerics ordered their followers to engage in passive non-compliance, and judges at times ignored the law in favour of reconciling wives to their husbands. In Ghana, widows who invoke their post-independence rights under intestate succession law still risk animosity within the extended family. Many are reluctant to

29. Lyn Ossome and Sirisha C. Naidu, "The Agrarian Question of Gendered Labour in Postcolonial Africa," in *Labour Questions in the Global South*, ed. Praveen Jha, Walter Chambati and Lyn Ossome (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 63–86.

30. Tamale, Sylvia. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Ottawa: Daraja Press, 2020

31. Hern, Erin Accampo. "When Do Women Win in Legally Plural Systems? Evidence from Ghana and Senegal." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, published online 2023 (Cambridge University Press).

32. Hern, 541–542

enforce rights that exist on paper, because the relatives who would otherwise inherit are the same people on whom the widow depends for material support.³³ The pattern across both cases is one this brief traces throughout: a legal win for women is treated less as a settled entitlement than as a provocation requiring social correction.

Section II: African Governments, Militarisation and Sexual Violence

Rigid ideas of gender and race were constructed and used to keep Africa not only peripheral, but to assign Africans to an inferior status. Through legal and juridical processes, ideas of private property, individual freedom, and emancipation were articulated, and significant distinctions were made between legal persons and non-persons. Women, slaves, and the other were excluded from legal personhood, but contractually bound to the colonial patriarch who held exclusive and absolute power and control over them.³⁴ The woman's legal recognition was mediated through a subordinate relationship with the patriarch, while the slave and the colonial other were excluded from legal recognition altogether.

Colonialism globalised this process through a legal order that placed the colonial subjects outside the protections and presumptions of civil law and governed them through customary law, denying them rights-bearing status and recognition as full political subjects. The purported civilising mission was not an attempt at equalisation but rather further alienation and production of difference. The colonial other had to be sufficiently different to justify perpetual domination and governance.

Independence was not enough to uproot these race and gender constructs, because postcolonial states are a direct product of those processes. Post-independence governments came to power as masculinist, nationalist and frequently militarised projects. Pereira similarly links militarism to aggressive constructions of masculinity and to broader structures of gender inequality.³⁵ Underpinned by the enduring constructs of modernity, postcolonial states continue to operate as disciplinarians of formerly colonised peoples, reproducing categories, hierarchies and forms of social ordering through which colonial power continues to govern the present.

This section asks a specific question. What happens when the institution that produces violent masculinities is also the institution to which survivors and feminist movements must turn for protection and redress?

33. Hern, Erin Accampo. "When Do Women Win in Legally Plural Systems? Evidence from Ghana and Senegal." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, published online 2023 (Cambridge University Press)

34. Lugones, M. (2023). The Coloniality of Gender. In L. De Souza Lima, E. Otero Quezada, & J. Roth (Eds.), *Feminisms in Movement: Theories and Practices from the Americas* (pp. 35–58). transcript Verlag / Columbia University Press.

35. Pereira, C. (2024). Africa's natural resources amid old and new imperial relations: What implications for gender justice? *Feminist Africa*, 5(2), 14–41. https://feministafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/002_FA-Vol5.4-Feature-Article_Pereira.pdf

The Symbolic Power Dilemma

Pierre Bourdieu extended Max Weber's definition of the state as the holder of a monopoly on legitimate physical violence by arguing that the state also claims a monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence: the power to name, to classify and to confer official recognition.³⁶ This symbolic power is what feminist movements seek when they demand that the state name femicide as a distinct crime, declare gender-based violence a national emergency, legislate protection or fund survivor services. Recognition by the state matters. It releases resources, shapes public understanding and makes certain harms officially visible.

Herein lies the dilemma. In appealing to the state's symbolic power, feminist movements also reinforce the legitimacy of an institution whose security apparatus perpetrates violence, whose economic choices reproduce the conditions for violence, and whose founding logics this brief has traced to colonial patriarchy. The state, in turn, gains from the exchange. Through international commitments and progressive laws, the state can present a rights-respecting image, attract donor funding, and claim moral authority, while the material investment needed to give those commitments substance does not materialise. Yet survivors cannot simply turn away from the state because they need to access medical treatment, forensic evidence, and courts.

The symbolic power dilemma cannot be resolved by choosing either engagement or refusal. It must be held consciously, with engagement pursued strategically and without mistaking the state for a

neutral entity. Critical questions about the lives of victims of violence must be answered here, particularly how symbolic power traps victims through extensive and dehumanising evidentiary processes, poverty and the limits it imposes, and the failure of health infrastructure causing inaccessibility. This includes the inadequacy of policing systems originally created to protect colonial infrastructure and personnel and quell dissent through extensive levels of violence as the holders of justice and bearers of evidence in sexual violence cases. This failure is exemplified by the abysmal levels of redress, particularly through the criminal legal systems.³⁷

All across Africa, the criminal justice systems continue to struggle to redress sexual violence, and there continues to be disparate definitions of what sexual violence entails, with many jurisdictions focusing on the morality of the victim to validate claims.³⁸ Legal, procedural, and societal obstacles continue to frustrate victims and their legal teams in the few cases that reach court; even fewer result in conviction. Even where financial compensation is available under law, access remains impossible, leaving poorer complainants unable to pursue their cases in the context of social reproduction.

Again, international and local legal instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, place upon the state the duty to prevent, investigate, punish, and provide remedies for all acts of discrimination against women

36. Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the State," *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (1994): 1–18.

37. Ibid.

38. Barriers to justice: Rape in Africa, law, practice and access to justice <https://equalitynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/EQUALITY-NOW-Barriers-to-Justice-Rape-in-Africa-Law-Practice-and-Access-to-Justice-EN-1.pdf>

wherever they occur. The above drives home the point made in Brief One of this compendium, of the tensions that exist between the symbolic power of states in sexual violence contexts and their real ability to actually show up given all the constraints built into the system.

Kenya: The Dilemma in the Present

Kenya illustrates the dilemma with particular clarity. At the 2021 Generation Equality Forum, the Kenyan government committed to ending gender-based violence and female genital mutilation (FGM) by 2026.³⁹ By late 2025, reporting by the Kenya-based Daily Nation found that these pledges had stalled; shelters were “collapsing under budget cuts,” data on gender-based violence was being misreported, and key reforms had been abandoned.⁴⁰ Initiatives under the 2026 plan, including a government performance indicator on gender-based violence, a survivors’ fund and the ratification of International Labour Organisation Convention 190, had either been abandoned or underfunded.⁴¹ Moreover, femicide continues to be recorded as murder, as activists called for a more correct categorisation. A report by the Centre for Rights Education and Awareness found that between 2020 and 2022, funding for prevention of gender-based violence fell by 30 per cent even as reported cases rose by 42 per cent.⁴²

The state’s own figures recorded at least

97 women killed in femicides between August and October 2024.⁴³ In November 2024, President William Ruto described gender-based violence as “tragic and unacceptable”; however, just weeks later, police in Nairobi fired tear gas at a peaceful march against femicide and arrested protesters.⁴⁴ The same state that pledges to end gender-based violence thus meets women who demand that it do so with the instruments of force.

The pattern has a longer history. It is part of the institutional memory of a security apparatus that the independent state inherited rather than dismantled. Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola noted that one branch of the police forces, the Administration Police (AP), was created to repress the independence movement and its mindset is inherently colonial and anti-African. Reckoning with police brutality therefore requires a deliberate effort to decolonise the police service.⁴⁵

39. UN Women Africa, “Generation Equality in Kenya,” <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/generation-equality-advancing-gender-equality-in-east-and-southern-africa/generation-equality-in-kenya>

40. Daily Nation, “Broken Lives: Why Kenya’s Protection against GBV Is Failing despite 2026 Deadline,” *Nation.Africa*, 28 November 2025. <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/gender/broken-lives-why-kenya-s-protection-against-gbv-is-failing-despite-2026-deadline--5279844>

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Al Jazeera, “Police Use Tear Gas on Kenya Protesters Rallying against Femicide,” 10 December 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/10/police-fire-tear-gas-at-kenya-protest-against-gender-based-violence>.

44. Ibid

45. Nyabola, Nanjala. “Decolonise da Police: How Brutality Was Written into the DNA of Kenya’s Police Service.” *African Arguments*, July 19, 2016. <https://africanarguments.org/2016/07/decolonise-da-police-how-brutality-was-written-into-the-dna-of-kenyas-police-service/>.

Section III: What Do We Understand by Sovereignty in the Context of Sexual Violence?

Our analysis of sovereignty is not merely a shorthand for the flag or the anthem. It names something closer to what Sara Salem calls an expansive idea: sovereignty over territory, over economic structures, over social and cultural life, and in this context, over the bodies through which social life is reproduced.⁴⁶ Understood this way, we ask, “who is sovereign?” and “whose body is safe from violation?” This section attempts to examine these questions in three parts: first, by showing that violence is not a failure of the same formation in Africa but one of its constitutive mechanisms; second, by showing what a state does with gendered violence specifically when its own legitimacy is contested; and third, by showing what happens, across registers, when women resist.

Critical Background to Africa’s Question of Sovereignty

Understanding sexual violence in Africa calls for a multidimensional approach accounting for the pluralisms, interrelations and the shifting nature of sovereignty as experienced by individuals, communities and states, including cultural, epistemic and metaphysical elements and features.⁴⁷ Legal scholars differentiate between legal and political sovereignty, claiming that while legal sovereignty lies with the state, political sovereignty remains with the people.⁴⁸ However, this section focuses on the construction and application of sovereignty narratives and realities against the backdrop of coloniality, legacies of apartheid and the current realities of women, poor and marginalised communities, as well as gender expansive people; their relation to violence and how the state is cast in this continuum.

Pre-colonial African political sovereignty predates the long history of Arab and European imperialisms, and it bears remembering. Muiu and Martin trace Africa’s history and cultural unity as far back as Egypt and Kush in the ninth century BCE; and without romanticising African history, this work reveals diverse political systems, social stratification, economic inequalities, and a variety of African religious beliefs and languages.⁴⁹ The “Fundi wa Africa” theory is one of the emerging knowledge systems poised to contest Euro-American hegemonic knowledge, which has consistently denied the existence of an orderly and progressive Africa before the colonial conquest.⁵⁰

The politics of pre-colonial Africa was diverse, ranging from stateless societies to centralised

46. Nayar, A. (2021, February 3). Feminism, sovereignty and pan-Africanism [Interview with S. Salem]. Africa Is a Country. <https://africasacountry.com/2021/02/feminism-sovereignty-and-the-pan-african-project-lessons-for-today>

47. Núñez, Jorge. (2024). State Sovereignty: Concept and Conceptions. International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique. 37. 2131-2150. 10.1007/s11196-024-10170-y.

48. Joseph Igbekele Aremo (2022) The Conceptualization Of Popular Sovereignty Within The Context Of The Nigerian Constitution: Between Symbolism And Realism UCC Law Journal. Volume 2 Issue 2 Dec. 2022, pp. 219-238 DOI: 10.47963/ucclj.v2i2.1124.

49. Muiu, Mueni wa, and Guy Martin. 2009. *A New Paradigm of the African State: Fundi wa Afrika*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 271 pp.

50. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo. (2013). Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization. Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization. 1-293.

kingdoms and empires.⁵¹ History shows a tapestry of systems ranging from semi-governed communities to powerful empires.⁵² The decentralised societies organised authority through kinship, age-grades, and consensus-based councils, while centralised kingdoms such as Ghana, Mali, Benin, and Kongo developed hierarchical bureaucracies, taxation systems, and standing armies.⁵³ Trade networks, particularly the trans-Saharan routes, connected these polities to wider worlds, transforming local economies and embedding African states in global exchanges of gold, salt, ivory, and enslaved humans. This political plurality demonstrates that Africa was far from a “stateless” continent, as colonial narratives often suggested.

Evidence shows that in decentralised societies, such as the Igbo in present-day Nigeria and the Nuer in South Sudan, leadership was communal and co-held by a council of elders who made critical decisions by consensus.⁵⁴ Present-day Tiv in Nigeria and the San in Southern Africa relied on egalitarian structures, communal sharing, and cooperation, tailored to their survival needs.⁵⁵ Mali is another clear example of African expressions of political and economic sovereignty. Mali existed as a sovereign state before Arab and European colonisation and mastered political institutions. They had developed their own complex thinking of sovereignty

and its pragmatic institutions long before articulations of the concept of sovereignty by European philosophers like Bodin, Hobbes, and Rousseau.⁵⁶ Texts including the Tarikh al-fattash, Tarikh al-Sudan, and The Epic of Askia Mohammed articulate this complex thinking about sovereignty.⁵⁷

African sovereignty continues to face a wide range of challenges that originate from its historical past, with Western and non-Western invasions, the transatlantic slave trade focused on kidnapping Africans for capitalist development in the West, Arab invasion and other imperial and exploitative forces. These legacies have engendered colonial logics, structural economic exploitation dependencies, subjugation of culture, ways of being and aesthetics, continued external geopolitical manipulation, and the resulting internal governance failures.

European colonisation resulted from the unfortunate Berlin Conference, where Europe and its allies regulated institutional colonisation and trade on the continent. This division of Africa by colonial powers resulted in the creation of countries that were either too small to support viable economies or too large and diverse to rule effectively.⁵⁸ These fundamental problems persist and continue to shape governance, epistemic and ontological ways of knowing and being, history, including the arbitrary borders with little regard for established

51. Yilmaz, Ö. (2025). Politics in pre-colonial Africa: An African-centered approach. *Beykoz Akademi Dergisi*, 13(2), 569–585. <https://doi.org/10.14514/beykozad.1551757>

52. Ibid.

53. Osafo-Kwaako, Philip, and James A. Robinson. “Political Centralization in Pre-Colonial Africa.” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 41, no. 1 (2013): 6–21.

54. Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, eds., *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1940).

55. Bohannan, P. (1958). *Justice and Judgement Among the Tiv* (pp. 54, 77). Oxford University Press.

56. Richard Hill, “The Mali Empire,” *Black History Month* 2026, March 13, 2023, <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/african-history/the-mali-empire/>.

57. Wise, Christopher. (2017). *Sovereignty in Pre-colonial Mali and Northern Africa*. 10.1057/978-1-137-59291-0_27.

58. Zambakari, C. (2025, March 20). *The future of African sovereignty in a multipolar world: Challenges and opportunities*. Pambazuka News. <https://www.pambazuka.org/The-Future-of-African-Sovereignty>

empires and sultanates, shared water resources, geographical characteristics, and access to the sea.

For example, some nations, like Gambia and Togo, now struggle with limited resources and market size, while others, like Nigeria, grapple with managing more than 250 ethnic groups within a single state, cutting across ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines. In another instance, the Somali people, in the twenty-first century, find themselves divided between four different countries, leading to ongoing conflicts and irredentist movements.⁵⁹

While African states may have virtually all the attributes of modern states, such as passports, customs, currency, parliaments, political parties, and United Nations membership, they are built on artificially created territory and power structures and were essentially captured before they could become their own thing.⁶⁰ This bears critical impact on sexual violence in Africa because the construction of a postcolonial state cannot be separate from its violent origins, and a competent understanding of sexual violence in Africa relies on the articulation and confrontation of these sovereignty questions.

Violence as an Institutional Companion to State Formation

Violence is often explained as something a state resorts to when it fails—a breakdown of otherwise legitimate authority. Lyn Ossome’s account of the colonial state suggests the opposite: violence was not a failure of legitimacy but its substitute. Since the colonial state’s right to rule never rested on the consent of the colonised, its authority “does not emanate from colonised peoples’ consensus,” which

means its rule, “including its coercive force, is ultimately illegitimate” from the start.⁶¹ This raises the question: how does a state that lacks political legitimacy in its own claimed territory establish dominion over its subjects? Ossome’s answer is unambiguous: “it does so by brute force”.⁶² Violence, on this account, is not incidental to the colonial state’s formation. It is, in her words, “the primary force that made the incorporation of natives into the state itself possible”.⁶³

This is the same historical process traced earlier in this brief from the transatlantic enslavement and human trafficking for Western capitalism, the Berlin Conference and the Enlightenment construction of racial modernity; to the making of legal personhood as a racialised and gendered category, the division of civil and customary law, and the invention of tribe. What Ossome’s framing adds is the reminder that none of this was achieved through persuasion. It had to be achieved through force, because the colonial state was an extractive process and had no other claim to make on the people it sought to rule.⁶⁴

If violence is constitutive of a state’s founding rather than incidental to its failures, then the same dynamic should be visible whenever a state’s authority is refounded, at independence, and again at any later moment when its legitimacy is seriously contested. The postcolonial state’s nationalist founding, as this brief has already argued, took on “the scaffoldings

59. Ibid.

60. Cooper, Frederick. *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

61. Ossome, L. (2024). Imperialism and crises of social reproduction in Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 51(181), 515–530. <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0034>

62. Ossome, L. (2024). Imperialism and crises of social reproduction in Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 51(181), 515–530. <https://doi.org/10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0034>

63. Ibid.

64. Gwaindepi, A. (n.d.). Taxation in Africa since colonial times. In *The history of African development*. African Economic History Network. <https://www.aehnnetwork.org/textbook/>

of power” bequeathed by the colonial state rather than dismantling them. But the pattern recurs even in moments explicitly staged as ruptures with an authoritarian past. Tunisia’s 2011 revolution promised precisely such a rupture, a new, sovereign, democratic order replacing decades of dictatorship. Yet Tunisia’s own transitional justice process would go on to document that “for decades, thousands of Tunisian women suffered from systematic sexual violence at the hands of state agents,” and that agents of the same security apparatus continued to threaten survivors and the Truth and Dignity Commissioners investigating them well after the revolution.⁶⁵ A state founded or refounded through rupture does not automatically inherit a different relationship to violence than the one it replaced; it inherits the same institutions and the same security apparatus, and this brief argues, even the same logic.

Sexual Violence as a Sovereignty Restorative

A shared understanding of the challenges that arise in the articulation, prevention, and response to sexual violence in Africa raises critical questions of coloniality and neoliberal control in Africa’s ownership of its critical social, mineral and knowledge infrastructures. An African feminist reading of sovereignty does not stop at geographical and political self-determination. It rightly frames it as a struggle for conceptual sovereignty at its core. This work agrees that a framing of sexual violence that excludes the conceptual and ontological capture under coloniality does not quite grasp the issue. The sovereignty question frames the articulation, understanding, response

and prevention of sexual violence in Africa not just as a neutral linguistic endeavour but as an epistemic and political practice through which Africa understands itself, its people and its vision. In an interview with Sara Salem on Africa is a country, she alludes to the reality of the differences in how African governments conceptualised sovereignty and shares some overlaps in how sovereignty as a whole was thought of and contested.⁶⁶ These overlaps include political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Therefore, African sovereignty encompasses territory, economic structures and social, epistemic, and temporal life. This means that a candid analysis of sexual violence in Africa requires examining how states weaponise sovereignty by using violence and questions of citizenship and belonging, as well as being the arbiter of justice in cases of violence.

In her work on post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia, Hind Zaki argues that sovereignty manifests in social forms, and that these forms are heavily gendered and become “highly relevant in times of political crisis and uncertainty.” As feminists seek to realise more protection for women through state law, for example, they implicate themselves in producing practices of state sovereignty, as laws are a mechanism by which the state builds legitimacy.⁶⁷ Writing on Tunisia, Zaki notes that women’s citizenship claims have played a crucial role in generating and sustaining claims to sovereignty through gendered citizenship.⁶⁸ Moreover, violence became a marker

65. Zaki, H. A. (2018). Resisting and redefining state violence: The gendered politics of transitional justice in Tunisia. *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 9(4), 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2018.1544005>

66. Feminism, sovereignty and pan-Africanism [hromanticisationhttps://africasacountry.com/2021/02/feminism-sovereignty-and-the-pan-african-project-lessons-for-today](https://africasacountry.com/2021/02/feminism-sovereignty-and-the-pan-african-project-lessons-for-today)

67. Zaki, Hind Ahmed. “Gendering the Study of State Authority/Power in the MENA Region: The Case of the Tunisian Feminist Movement 2011–2021.” POMEPS Studies 59: *Political Movements in North Africa and the Sahel, Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2026, pomeps.org/gendering-the-study-of-state-authority-power-in-the-mena-region-the-case-of-the-tunisian-feminist-movement-2011-2021.

68. Ibid.

by which states assert and express their sovereignty, and as the state positions itself as a protector of women, it becomes more difficult to differentiate between state-sanctioned violence and everyday violence against women in public spaces. Zaki's central argument is that sovereignty is lived and produced through everyday social relations. If we conceptualise this in relation to the viewpoint on Africa's resources, then we could relate resource sovereignty to bodily sovereignty, as they are interconnected struggles.

Writing on the Latin American context, Segato notes that extractive economics views land and women's bodies as territories and terrains to be exploited and, in this sense, asserting domination happens through violence.⁶⁹

Linking the ideas of state sovereignty and violence is not a difficult task under colonial logics because sovereign countries engage in the use of violence to maintain their independence while exerting violence through imperialism, colonialism and extractivism. European states, founded on and maintained by chauvinist, racist and expansionist logics, continue to exert colonial power without regard for the humanity or sovereignty needs of the colonised. Formerly colonised countries, on the other hand, particularly in Africa, were established through violence, whether as a means of liberating themselves from colonialism or as a matter of historical conquest of ancestral lands. The history of African liberation shows that physical, economic, and embodied violence shaped the founding of these contemporary states. This framework of violence regulates the global order, with Western countries relying on narratives of African incompetence to justify the theft of resources. This

coloniser worldview prevented them from grasping the complex ways sovereignty was historically secured for some while being denied to others. Perhaps no more compelling proof of this exists than the process of European exploration and expansion into countries at the margins of the then-known world.

Critical enquiry two in the position paper, "Recentering African Indigenous Knowledges to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Violence", expands on the critical questions that arise when the state is treated as the neutral arbiter of justice in violence cases, knowing that the state itself is a construction of violence which re-establishes itself and retains its sovereignty through violence. This normatively violent nature of contemporary African state apparatus cannot be delinked from coloniality, and the inability to curb sexual violence on a continental level flows from this logic. Therefore, sexual violence in Africa is attributable, at least in part, to the continued influence of colonial power structures, ideologies, and hierarchies and how they reproduce, entrench and justify violence. Current models of redress and prevention devalue, commodify, and hypersexualise victims, while framing sexual violence as largely relational and cultural, therefore ignoring its deep roots in systemic, patriarchal, and economic colonial domination.

What might be possible if Africa owned its own natural and embodied resources? What changes would this make to understanding and preventing sexual violence in Africa? What possibilities exist for truly understanding and articulating sexual violence through African feminist epistemologies? What do we gain if we look at violence in Africa through the interplay of the coloniality of land, gender, resources, epistemologies, power, sovereignty, and the persistent neo-colonial state?

69. Segato, Rita Laura. "Territory, Sovereignty, and Crimes of the Second State: The Writing on the Body of Murdered Women." In *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas*, edited by Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

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Notes

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Liberation Alliance
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Recentring African Feminist Epistemologies in Sexual Violence Prevention and Response

Critical inquiry Two: Coloniality of Sexual Violence: Gender, Power,
Sovereignty, and the Neo-Colonial State

A compendium by Liberation Alliance Africa

October 2026