ARTICLE 03

WHO COUNTS AS A WOMAN IN FEMINIST SPACES? A QUESTION WE MUST KEEP ASKING

If feminism promises liberation, who is welcomed into its rooms, whose experiences shape its agenda, and who is still asked to prove that they belong?

Across feminist spaces, the word “women” can carry both solidarity and difficult questions. Women do not share one identical life. Race, class, disability, age, geography, HIV status, sexuality, gender identity, migration, work and access to resources can shape how a person experiences power and discrimination. A movement that speaks about women’s liberation must therefore ask whether it recognises this diversity in practice, not only in its statements.

The African Feminist Charter recognises that African feminists do not have a homogeneous identity: it calls for acknowledging and celebrating diversity while working towards social transformation. It also emphasises women’s agency and the need to recognise African women as subjects—not objects—of feminist work. [1] This offers a useful challenge: feminist solidarity cannot depend on pretending that differences do not exist, nor should difference become an excuse to exclude people from dignity, safety or participation.

> *“We acknowledge and celebrate our diversities and our shared commitment to a transformative agenda for African societies and African women in particular.”*
> **— Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, “Our Identity as African Feminists” [1]**

So, how are women defined in the feminist spaces we build? Who gets to name the priorities? Who is invited to speak on panels, lead organisations, receive funding, publish research, make art or shape policy? Are women living with HIV included when conversations turn to health and bodily autonomy? Are sex workers heard as organisers and experts on their own lives? Are trans women treated as participants in feminist organising, or only mentioned when a project needs to

demonstrate inclusion? Are women with disabilities, rural women, young women, older women and women facing economic insecurity able to participate on equal terms?

Inclusion is not achieved by counting how many people are in a room if some cannot speak freely, access the venue, afford transport, obtain interpretation, or disagree without fear of ridicule or punishment. Nor is empowerment meaningful if opportunities are offered only to those who already have professional networks, institutional recognition or the language favoured by funders. The question is not whether every group has identical experiences. It is whether feminist spaces take those differences seriously when distributing voice, resources, leadership and opportunity.

The Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa calls on states to combat discrimination and integrate a gender perspective into policy and programmes. [2] But principles must be tested in daily practice: who controls budgets, whose knowledge counts as expertise, who is safe to disclose their experiences, and who is expected to remain silent to preserve a sense of unity?

These questions are not meant to weaken feminism. They are an invitation to make it more accountable, more honest and more capable of challenging overlapping forms of oppression. A feminist space should not require people to erase parts of themselves to be accepted. It should create conditions where women in all their diversity can participate, lead, disagree, create and shape shared priorities.

So let us ask the public, organisers, funders and feminist institutions: when we say "women," whom do we mean? Who is still missing from our tables, our stories, our budgets and our decisions? And what are we prepared to change so that recognition becomes real access, and access becomes equal power?

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- **[1] African Feminist Forum, Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists — Preamble and "Our Identity as African Feminists" —** https://www.africanfeministforum.com/feminist-charter-preamble/
- **[2] African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) —** https://achpr.au.int/en/node/878

- **[3] African Union, Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment and Development —** https://www.au.int/en/gender-equality-development