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Senegal

# The challenges of feminism in Senegal

- Features - Feminism -

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**The text below is the opening speech delivered by Senegalese sociologist, Fatou Sow, on 28 January 2023 at the launch of the Network of Feminists of Senegal, which took place at the Henriette Bathily Women's Museum in Dakar. As Sow says, Africa is “the only continent to have a convention on women's human rights, promoted, at the African level, by the African Union”. This network is a concretization in Senegal of this charter and an important step forward in the feminist struggle in Senegal and more generally in Africa, especially Francophone Africa.**

I feel a really great joy and a certain relief to participate in this launch of the Senegal Feminist Network, for two major reasons. The first reason is the desire of women's organizations to declare themselves feminist, feminist without ifs or buts, as set out in the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, developed in 2009 by the African Feminist Forum, a pan-African women's movement, created in Accra in 2006.

The second reason is the desire to network, after a series of debates, which is not always easy. Indeed, we are going through often difficult contexts where multiple challenges, differences of opinion, ideological contradictions, tense power and leadership relations, collective and personal ambitions and interests, can be sources of competition, rivalries, conflicts and ruptures, despite the need to be together and fight together, from the most common platform possible, in the face of “common enemies” to our possible causes. Can we already consider these two reasons as issues in our feminist struggles?

Thank you for inviting me, which I feel is an honour, to remind you of the challenges of feminism in Senegal. I would have liked to point out, although I am Senegalese and live in Senegal, it is Africa that interests me; because Africa, including its diaspora, is ultimately my space for feminist reflection and engagement, without even indicating, here, a pan-Africanist perspective. We are the only continent to have a convention on women's human rights, promoted at the African level by the African Union. The majority of states, from Algeria to South Africa, have adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of African Women, better known as the Maputo Protocol (2003).

After exhausting myself deconstructing some of the greatness and weaknesses of Western feminisms, especially their views on us Africans, I decided not to devote any more time to them, unless their words are part of my efforts to theorize myself, as an African woman. The questions I am working on are what it means to be a feminist in Africa, what is feminism for, what should we learn from it in terms of analysis and strategies for action and how? It is not easy, as the fronts of struggle are numerous. We are so often told: “you are a feminist, therefore Western”. I no longer answer this question to anyone, least of all to my male colleagues in our universities and/or other men in our civil societies. To women, I do not answer; I discuss our differences of opinion to touch on some commonalities. And I can't wait to get out of neo, post and decolonial discourses as exclusive frameworks for explaining our concerns. To get out of it is to recover our true independence and build our own modes of presence in the world. I am sure that you face the same constraints and have the same aspirations.

Being with you won't mean passing the baton to you, as you might expect; We are, after all, in transgenerational relationships, to use a common expression today. Subsequent generations often blame previous generations for not having transmitted anything to them, as if commitment, and more particularly feminist commitment, were transmittable. Feminist engagement is first and foremost a voluntary act that seeks, listens, learns, discusses, cultivates itself, in the face of concrete situations, full of changing challenges for each generation, for each social category, for each group or individual. My feminist fight is not yours, because I hope you have retained our acquired rights. Yours will be to preserve them and conquer others, for future generations.

What pleases me today is to have the opportunities to exchange and debate with you, to be challenged and to challenge you, to have been able to establish relationships that allowed me to participate in your meetings, in your spaces, with pleasure, knowing that I was going to learn from my experiences and how I myself was going to learn from yours.

So, what are the challenges of feminism in Senegal?

# The major challenge: to (re)know feminism, as theory and practice of action

*It is still difficult to be a feminist, yesterday as today, to recognize oneself as such, to be accepted as such.*

This will be more and more so, given the observed setbacks and the anti-gender (anti-feminist) discourses that are becoming popular around the world. Who would have thought that the right to abortion, enshrined as a federal right in the US constitution since 1973, thanks to decades of feminist struggles, would be removed from this same constitution, in November 2022. American women would have almost returned to the level of Senegalese women who, it is true, have enormous difficulties in making abortion a public debate. In the 1970s, the term feminist was rejected by African women, as people independent of colonization whose ideologies and knowledge, rules and norms had to be decolonized, rejected Western colonial political, economic and cultural domination (each their own colonist).

*We thus had to claim our priorities, in the face of a generalization of feminist struggles.*

We started from models and agendas produced by a dominant, and let us say it, "arrogant" West (Mernissi, 1984). It was necessary to "situate" our priorities in our historical contexts and living spaces, and then place them on the international agenda as an African agenda. Forty years later, many of these struggles have led to definite advances, including the right to a voice in Africa itself and in the world, our contribution to the platform of the Beijing Women's Conference (1995), the drafting and voting of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, on women's rights (2003). This so-called Maputo Protocol obliges signatory states to guarantee women's rights, including the right to participate in the political process, social and political equality with men, greater autonomy in their health decisions, an end to female genital mutilation, the legalization of abortion, and so on., to name just a few salient points.

*We have the battle of concepts: feminism, gender, empowerment versus empowerment, parity, the right to control one's body, and so on.*

The battle has barely begun, especially when we are summoned to say them in our own languages. The ordinary opinion thinks that, if we do not succeed, it is because the situations to which these concepts refer do not exist in our contexts! Today, these terms have fallen into the public domain. They have become popularized. This has not made it easy for feminists who are challenged, apostrophized, stigmatized, if not ridiculed, mocked, even abused, always condemned to explain themselves. We are summoned to respond to all situations, to all nonsense, and so on. We are constantly challenged: "you feminists, where are you, what do you do, what do you answer?" You call yourself feminist? (Do we believe in it ourselves?); feminism does not apply to Senegalese realities (public opinion does not believe in it); Feminist principles are contrary to Islam, except perhaps those of Islamic feminists, and again! We find it difficult to put forward a position that questions Islam; Futile example: I can't stand polygamy, but it's a prescription of Islam.

## The challenges of feminism in Senegal

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If it is still difficult to talk about feminism, public opinion has seized on gender, but the concept has become sanitized, apolitical, even depoliticized, as elsewhere. It applies more often to women, as a human, sexual, social or political category, than to power relations between the sexes, which is its original definition. Joan Scott explains that gender is:

a constituent element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes ... It is also a "primary way of signifying power relations, a field of norms and practices by means of which power is articulated (1988).

Nothing is more desperate than hearing journalists of all genders, media hosts talk about gender in everything that concerns us. There is currently so much expertise in gender that one wonders why our problems are not solved since or are not properly posed? What kind of gender are we talking about? Is this a feminist critique of our concerns?

And even then, while we were comfortable with the concept of social relations of sex, namely the social relations between men and women, we are today more than ever shaken by the denials, even challenges of the binary (man versus woman) and the critique of heteronormativity that leads to heated debates in our contemporary societies. Are we ready to understand these other sexualities, without taboos, without prejudice and without moral panic manifested loudly by Islamic associations, in Dakar, in February 2002, after the refusal of Parliament to toughen the criminalization of homosexuality and other "unnatural" acts?

*Studying, understanding, learning feminism, its concepts, analyses and perspectives are crucial issues for Senegalese and African feminism.*

We cannot claim to be feminists, if we do not know the principles and rules, if we do not understand them, if we do not deconstruct them, if we do not adapt them to capture our realities and our concerns that may be distant or close to those of the rest of the world. We must read, learn, discuss, reflect, exchange, participate in debates (feminist or to make them feminist) of our own society and our continent (the Africa of women thinks and moves more than we think), women of the South (from the Caribbean to Asia, from Latin America to the Middle East whose experiences we share including those of colonialism). Yes, as Africans and women of the Global South, we have our own special debates. We have to do the same exercise with women in the West (the term is vague, because the differences can be staggering). We share the same human space; let us not give them the power to dominate thinking and organize women's agenda in their terms.

We have produced our reflections on feminism that we challenged, and then we built the norms and priorities that suited our positions. Over several decades, these theorizing efforts have been constant and intense. Women activists from Africa and its diasporas have created several: Womanism, Jenda (gender), Motherism (Maternalism), Femalism (Femmisme), Stiwanism, Black Feminism, Afro-Feminism, African Feminism and many others. All have sought to decolonize women's studies and create an order of thought inscribed in African historical contexts concerning African issues. Sylvia Tamale's recent publication, "Decolonization and Afro-Feminism" (2020), provides an excellent overview of how colonization has profoundly changed the status of African women in their societies and opens up new avenues for deconstructing these relationships.

*Feminism in Senegal, as in the rest of Africa, is part of a global history of women's struggles.*

As I happened to write, in the 9th volume (forthcoming) of the "General History of Africa",

African feminism, a fortiori Senegalese, is at the same time the creation, extension and renewal of thoughts linked to contexts and histories both specific to the continent and attached to a world that has continued to globalize. Feminism can be said to be part of a political movement of reflection and action that has helped to give greater visibility to the experiences of African women, within structures of predominant masculinity over a very long period of time.

Understanding this is a major challenge.

The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, drafted by the African Feminist Forum, reminds us that:

Identifying as feminists, we politicize the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for analysis and transformative measures (2006).

We must politicize our reflections and actions whether they are cultural, religious, economic and of course political, because they arise from politics.

We have the right to question, to discuss, to have convictions and doubts, keeping women's concerns in mind, considering age, class, level of education, ideological, cultural and religious positions, and so on. The task is complex. The slightest successes, such as the legal abolition of female genital mutilation, despite the maintenance of its practice due to lack of supervision by the legislator and the authorities, parity, despite the many breaches of the principle since its adoption, or our nationality given to our children, must be welcomed and monitored, as they are so uncertain. They can be accepted and then forgotten in the drawer of a ministry office or parliament; They can be little or not applied or finally consciously buried. Law No. 2020-05 amending Law No. 65-60 of 21 July 1965 on the Penal Code, criminalizing rape and paedophilia, although a victory for the women's movement, may have been treated lightly, according to Senegalese activists.

## What are the major concerns that drive us to want to transform our situations of oppression?

*Among the inequalities inherent in Senegalese society, those between the sexes represents a primary challenge: abolishing them is a key issue in our struggles.*

These inequalities are obvious and known. The sociologist Abdoulaye Bara Diop denounced, in his scientific work, "The systems of inequality and domination" (1981) of Wolof society. Feminism has fundamentally pointed the finger at the social construction of social relations between the sexes, as power relations, their political construction in African cultures: hierarchy of ages, sexes, ethnicities, castes, classes, social formations, and so on.

We tend to think that equality is a demand of Western feminists, that it is a utopia. But does this prevent us from measuring what we have long described as heaviness of all kinds, then discrimination and finally inequality, imposed as social, cultural and religious norms? It is difficult to denounce the latter, for fear of disturbing a social and sacred order, of being unseemly, of offending, of blaspheming; there are countries where you can go to trial for blasphemy, such as Mauritania or Sudan. Cultural and religious fundamentalism is rampant.

What I call fundamentalism is the supposed return to so-called authentic culture and religion and applying its rules, as the world changes (Sow 2018).

It is more than urgent to investigate when culture becomes the source and place of expression of fundamentalisms and allows itself to be caught up in fundamentalist excesses, whether social, moral or religious. To discuss gender

inequalities and the influence of fundamentalisms, three areas need to be examined for their relevance: the female body (health, sexuality, fertility), the legal system (family code and other laws and regulations) and political organization (positioning in decision-making, parity in institutions).

We need to know our history and our social values, while ceasing to "essentialize", that is to say, to reduce ourselves to our feminine condition which is to be a child, wife, mother and grandmother/ancestor described as Great Royal, wonderfully described by Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1961). To "essentialize" us is to freeze ourselves in a fixed identity of an African past; this prevents us from challenging the real privileges of masculinity in the face of societies that "culturalize" gender inequalities, patriarchal religions (Islam, Christianity) that "fundamentalize" them, or states that call themselves Muslims and Christians, which "legalize" them, even though their constitution is secular. We must always question the "before, it was better" and sort out our different societal heritages before colonization (a period that has its challenges), during colonization and post-independence, our conversions to various religious and spiritual confessions.

### *Matriarchy and/or patriarchy: an element of the African feminist debate?*

This discussion is certainly at the heart of African feminist studies. Indeed, if feminism denounces patriarchy and male domination as sources of women's oppression and places them at the centre of its theoretical and political struggles, what is the position of African feminists? This question has, from the very first approaches, raised strong theoretical contradictions, of which I will raise only a few points here; because they are far from being resolved.

Patriarchy, as a universal anthropological given, has been widely criticized by African research, while the women's movement advances its impact, and therefore its existence, in the analysis of contemporary situations of women. The author of "L'Unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire" (1982, 2nd edition), Cheikh Anta Diop, theoretician of African matriarchy, makes it the basis of our societies. "Matriarchy is not the absolute and cynical triumph of woman over man; It is a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes to better build a sedentary society where everyone blossoms fully by engaging in the activity that is most consistent with their physiological nature. A matriarchal regime, far from being imposed on man by circumstances beyond his control, is accepted and defended by him". (p.114). The fundamental principles were the assurance of filiation by women, heredity by the uterine line, transmission of political rights, and so on. Hence the prominent status of women. Diop shows that "the matriarchal regime is general in Africa, both in antiquity and in the present day, and this cultural trait does not result from ignorance of the role of the father in the conception of the child" (p. 69). This involves a certain duality comparing matrilineal and patrilineal lineages and the place of an African patriarchy. Finally, women occupy an important place in religious representations and practices, different from that of men. It was the introduction of new religions (here, Islam and Christianity) and European colonial intervention that imposed patriarchy and its hierarchies.

One of the important fault lines in women's analyses is at this level. A whole section of African women's research rejects the biological sexual division of African societies, arguing that Western gender ideology did not correspond to their realities. Women could play a male role and lead, just as men could assume a feminine role, male and female roles not being as rigid to be a source of transgression. This is the demonstration of Ifi Amadiume's book, "Male Daughters, Female Husbands" (1987), which questioned the notions of sex and gender in African society. Many African women, based on their stories, recognize this social basis illustrated by the place of motherhood in women's lives as a social value and divine obligation. They also recognize the importance of matrilineal transmission of filiation (birth) and specific links built between children on this uterine relationship (*doomu ndey*). There are still indications of devolution of political power (belonging to a maternal family for a man to accede to power), transmission of certain material, cultural and spiritual goods, and so on. But we ask this question: did this essential role give power to women, apart from the Lingeer, women of the aristocracy, and female personalities of the political elite? What kind of authority and at what level? If management and control tasks have been assigned to them, in the Senegalese space, it is men who have been at the height of power. These rulers or authorities bore male titles: Dammel, Buur, Brak, Maad, Teeñ, Almaami, Lamaan, Jaraaf, and so on.

## The challenges of feminism in Senegal

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The debate is difficult to engage in Senegalese (and African) feminism, while it is essential, because the "exceptional" place of the feminine, in pre-colonial societies, is always agitated, with more or less happiness, in the face of its demands. Can we not reread patriarchy, matrilineality, facts and values resulting from them, to understand their impact on our societies then and today? Because, whatever the system, masculinity bears its mark: important roles of brothers and uncles, in all cases.

The space of this article does not allow for the development of the question. I think, personally, that the matriarchal basis has left its clues; one is struck by the centrality of women in social organization. Their contributions to the reproduction of families, their domestic maintenance, education and the transmission of cultural values, the use of their knowledge and skills essential to the economic development of societies and their social and moral burdens occupied such a place in pre-colonial structures that they could not marginalize them in the management of affairs and politics. Hence the presence of all these "strong" women and the value of our "matrimony", despite their invisibilization in memories, the rivalry in male precessions. Women have been central but have never been equal. They have rarely reached the highest level of power. But were they expected? Colonization, with its patriarchal logic, marginalized them by establishing new institutions of education and political management, while using their labour power to feed and maintain the colony. The independent powers, by maintaining the colonial modalities of governance, continued to use this force, without giving them more power. The obstacles to this conquest of power are massive.

*Feminism makes it possible to maintain this political space of contestation and resistance to the unequal order of patriarchal society and/or male domination.*

We still need, in Senegal, to identify and deconstruct male domination and all the other forms of domination forged by the patriarchy that is its source or stems from it. These forces of domination can be local and/or global, as evidenced by the interventions of globalization on all our socio-cultural, economic and political systems. It is important to recognize that male domination explains many situations of current oppression. We do not expand women's spaces of power, denying those of oppression.

What gender has introduced into feminist thinking is the awareness of power relations between the sexes, even if Judith Butler and many other authors have ended up questioning this bicategorization of the sexes and affirming that the notion of sex could not be reduced to heterosexuality and that there were other forms than all societies, in Africa certainly, are not ready to accept, as mentioned above.

We need to reconsider, even question, the power relations in the family, in the political world (what parity?), in global society (fight against inequalities and discrimination). The struggles against inequalities in the family code have been significant at this level. I will not go into the debate, except to say that the struggle has been long and that every point won is a victory to be preserved, because it is a challenge against the abuses of conservative forces.

Our body is political. It is the subject of so many norms, rules, regulations, taboos and prejudices. It is the object of both control and violence that everyone finds normal. Listen or read what is being said in society, through the media, social networks, other means of communication. I will take a few examples of issues, a little loosely.

Getting girls into school is, let's face it, an ambition of families and politicians. Their schooling is increasing, according to official figures. SCOFI and education policies have made their way. But this schooling still faces many obstacles, if not discrimination. To educate a person is to develop their intellectual and moral capacities towards knowledge, but for women, it is also to teach them the way to freedom in all its aspects and equality. Schooling is not only creating women's autonomy (as a certain gender lexicon wants), but it is developing their power, training them to manage it, to strengthen it for their position in the family, in society. Various constraints continue to weigh on them. The first are linked to cultural attitudes affecting their status and roles of women in the family that prevent them from accessing

education, to complete it in the best conditions. These are the difficulties of keeping them in school, marriages and early pregnancy, even if the latest censuses show the gradual increase in the age of entry into nuptiality and fertility. Material and financial conditions (family poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure and precarious levels of education), poor employment opportunities, male preference for certain jobs and positions, the complexity of trends in the informal economy (which is the largest provider of jobs and paid activities and which accounts for the majority of women's activities), while the various climate, political and health crises are sources of multiple constraints and discrimination.

We are in societies where the development of women, although they constitute more than half of the population, creates a kind of panic, if not moral embarrassment, in society. They are asked to develop, to grow through education, without changing and especially not disturbing their position in society. Despite their diplomas and training, whatever the levels, they are still required to prove their ability by making more effort, to restrict their ambitions below their abilities and performance, to suffer all kinds of demeaning sexist prejudices and acts of sexual violence that aim either to punish their ambitions or to break their progress, *droit de seigneur* still in force in Senegalese faculties of all disciplines, sexual harassment, rape, refusal of maternity leave to young women doctors in specialization, and so on.. The list goes on.

Feminism forces us to revisit the links between family and economic relations. Who supports families and what power is gained from them? Is it domestic maintenance, economic maintenance? How to gauge women's domestic tasks? *Ligeey*, they say in Wolof; This is "free work for women," feminists reinforce. The Family Code has come to recognize this in this qualification and counts it in the contribution of women to the household. How are natural resources managed in rural families: who is responsible for land allocation? Who has access to the land? Tasks are distributed in the fishing economies, according to a sexual division of labour. What is the situation today? The usual approach of the *lebu* woman makes her a strong woman. In what terms? How do we need to rethink this role. How does having to be a "strong woman" make women vulnerable?

The access to politics supported by democratization processes in Africa testifies to a real complexity because of the links between culture, religion and politics, the violent rise of multiple forms of fundamentalism on which all bodies of authority and power feed, and so on.

*We need to reflect on new ways of looking at sexuality and fertility, so that we can control and dispose of our bodies.*

It is then necessary to revisit the very notion of sexuality. Can we claim the right to control our bodies and sexuality? It has taken time to denounce sexual harassment, rape, incest, and other sexual violence within and outside families. It took just as much to question virginity as the sexual condition of nuptiality. The first #metoo movements were denounced as copies of American movements. They had to fight their way through widespread hostility. Do we have the courage to question heterosexuality? To take a different look at homosexuality? What about a-sexuality? We have heard everything about sexual orientation, in terms of scandal, unnatural practices; #faced with the virtual silence, if not hostility, of the Academy or simply of science, the press is unleashed.

We have so much to do because of the incredible debates about fertility and the requirement of motherhood (sublimated moral and religious value of women). Motherhood, beyond the need for children, is an obligation, both social and religious. Women are expected to perform the function deemed "natural" and divine. The non-desire for children is experienced as sacrilege and feminine selfishness. Only women are prosecuted in cases of neonaticide. Let us not forget that paternity research is forbidden by Islam. The law prohibits in the declaration of birth of a child the reference to the incestuous father. The sterile woman is incriminated for not having contributed to the "manufacture" of this (numerous) offspring which allows the man to ensure his masculinity and to establish his social power. This prestige, primarily masculine, passes through the bodies of women, whose sexuality and fertility are controlled by social rules defined in each group: virginity, circumcision, surveillance, dowry, marriage, submission to

the desire of the spouse, fertility capacity, fertility management, duration and restrictive rituals of widowhood (haircut, specific clothing, prohibition to look in the mirror, seclusion and absence of sexual relations), levirate/sororate, and so on.

This duty of reproduction (conjugal duty) can reinforce the subordination of women, conditioned socially, ideologically, religiously to ensure the physical reproduction of the group, at the cost of their health. This reproductive defect, whether infertility or sterility, is primarily attributed to women. They are the ones who worry about the infertility or non-occurrence of the socially required pregnancy. They are criticized either directly or by specific allusions or relational behaviours: anxiety, nervousness, bad mood, and so on. They take responsibility for the failure and, after resorting to various therapies, let a member of the entourage or the doctor discuss the problem with the husband, while he himself is involved in this infertility. The doctors will say it better than I can.

Controlled access to contraception, which is in complete contradiction with Senegalese law and the Maputo Protocol and other conventions signed by Senegal, as well as the criminalization of the right to abortion, often make women's health problematic. What happens to women who suffer organ descent and fistulas because of repeated pregnancies? What is the fate of children who lose their mother to childbearing fatigue? This health that is not only maternal. We should ask more about what happens to the woman, outside this fertile period. What is the true status of menopause? What is the path paved with heavy conditions and pitfalls that leads to the status of Great Royal?

It has been necessary to reclassify acts of physical, moral, symbolic and sexual violence, as well as obstetrics and gynaecology, and so on. Do we still remember the case of Doki Niase, which made hundreds of women march in the streets of Kaolack and Dakar? On this occasion, women and their movements (feminist or not) were accused of questioning the husband's right to beat his wife, which was said to be allowed by tradition and Islam. Is it not time to think of women in terms of rights on the basis of a social contract that does not depend on religious texts, but on a negotiated contract, extracted on the basis of contemporary principles of justice and freedom? The family code is still struggling in its religious principles. In the early 2000s, a legal return of Sharia law proposed by CIRCOFS was avoided, leaving the current code to non-Muslims.

## In conclusion

Women are trapped between the ordinary prejudices of communities against them, religious arguments of submission, paradoxical decisions and attitudes of politics, legitimized in the name of culture and religion. They have to face their challenges. The rights to greater equality and social justice won at the local, national and international levels are like endangered species because they are subverted by the rise of fundamentalisms of various kinds. No cultural revolution, no return to the sources or ethnic, religious or national authenticity, claimed by the groups that demand them, can legitimize the persistence, imbued with idealization, of so-called traditional or ancestral values, which involve serious discrimination and inequality. It is a huge challenge for women who have culturally and religiously endorsed patriarchal discourse or male domination, to question them. It is an immense task for feminists to get them out of it to transform our world of inequalities and to transform the male gaze and discourse that dominate the political scene, to understand and support the necessary changes underway in Senegal, Africa and the world.

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