

**International  
Institute of  
Social Studies**

*Erasmus*

## **Digital Spaces as Contested Sites for Activism**

A Research Paper presented by:

***Emaediong Ofonime Akpan***  
(Nigeria)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

**Social Justice Perspectives**  
(SJP)

Specialization: **Women and Gender Studies**

Members of the Examining Committee:

Arul Chib  
Bilge Sahin

The Hague, The Netherlands  
December 2024

***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

***Inquiries:***

International Institute of Social Studies  
P.O. Box 29776  
2502 LT The Hague  
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460  
e: [info@iss.nl](mailto:info@iss.nl)  
w: [www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)  
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>  
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

***Location:***

Kortenaerkade 12  
2518 AX The Hague  
The Netherlands

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Appendices</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Acronyms</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>viii</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Why am I Doing this Research?	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem	2
1.3 Concepts and Constructs Used in this Research	3
1.3.1 Silence as Subverted Agency	3
1.3.2 Activism by African Women	3
1.3.2 1.4 Research Questions	4
1.5 Justification of this Research	4
1.6 Organisation of the Research	5
<b>Chapter 2 Activism in Digital Spaces: Exploring the Relationship Between Technology and Society</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Activism in Digital Spaces: Select Examples	6
2.1.1 #YellowUmbrellaMovement (Hong Kong)	6
2.1.2 #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSARS (United States of America (USA) and Nigeria)	6
2.1.3 #RejectFinanceBill2024 (Kenya)	7
2.2.4 #FreeSenegal (Senegal)	8
2.2 Gendered Activism in Digital Spaces	8
2.2.1 #MeToo movement (Globalised)	8
2.2.2 #BringBackourGirls (Nigeria)	9
2.3 Digital Spaces as Sites for Power: Encountering Backlash	9
2.3 TechnoFeminism Theory	11
2.3.1 TechnoFeminism in the African Context	12
<b>Chapter 3 Gathering Knowledge from Marginalised Lives</b>	<b>14</b>
3.0 Recruitment of Participants	14
3.1 From Insider to Outsider: Reflections on Silent Participants	16
3.2 Whose Lives Are We Examining?	17
3.2.1 Analytical Procedures	18
3.2.2 Ethical Consideration and Limitations	18
<b>Chapter 4 Nobody is Coming to Save Us</b>	<b>19</b>
4.2 Findings and Discussion	19
1. Identities, Intersectionality, and the Experience of Backlash	19
1a. Experiences of Transgender Women	19

1b. Experiences of Cis-Women Entrepreneurs	21
1c. Experiences of a Muslim Woman	23
2. How Everyday Women and Activists Respond to Backlash	23
3. Online Backlash as Normalised Violence	25
4. Digital Vigilantism: Claiming Power or Reproducing Violence?	27
5. Silence as Subverted Agency, Power, and Resistance	28
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b>	<b>30</b>
5.1 Looking Ahead	30
5.2 Suggestion for further studies	31
BIBLIOGRAPHY	32
List of Appendices	42

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1 List of Participants	18
---------------------------------	----

## List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample Signed Information and Consent Form.....	42
Appendix 2: Sample Interview Guides .....	45

## List of Acronyms

EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children Emergency Fund
LMIC	Low and Middle-Income Countries
VAW	Violence Against Women
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
EUI	Economic Intelligence Unit
SARS	Special Anti-Robbery Squad
TS	Transgender
PWD	Person With Disability
FIDA	La Federación Internacional de Abogadas
KII	Key Informant Interview

## Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to God whose grace has helped me through the darkest nights.

I sincerely thank the women who shared their experiences with me even when it was difficult to do so.

I am grateful to Arul Chib, my supervisor, whose work on ‘subverted agency’ deepened my passion for embarking on this research. Thank you for believing in me and being very supportive. I could not have completed this work without you challenging me to ask critical questions and attempt to answer them in my authentic voice.

I am thankful to my second reader, Bilge Sahin who has shown me kindness and provided me with the most insightful comments I could ever ask for. Your dedication to my research made my work easier.

To my father, Dr. Ofonime Akpan you gave me wings to fly and made me believe I could do anything, this degree is for you. To my mother Gloria Akpan who has never let me relax on my oars, I am immensely grateful for your unwavering support. To my family, Fenno, Ini-iso, Dd, and Matai thank you for your support.

Ke-mfon Decade, I am eternally grateful for the gift of your love and support thank you for always putting me first. We did this Sugar!

To my peer discussants, Eno-obong Etim and Sarita Santoshini, this work would not have been possible without your insights and critical questions. Thank you for investing your time in reviewing my research paper.

To my friend Ubong-abasi Obot, thank you for always reminding me that this is the starting point. To my friends and family in ISS, the prayers, laughter, and meals we shared made this journey worthwhile.

## Abstract

Digital technology has become a vital part of our everyday lives shaping our interactions with one another. This research paper examines how these technologies particularly ‘digital spaces’<sup>1</sup> like Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram *etcetera* which have become vital in activism are also sites of gendered relations that expose women to backlash. Relying on the theories of technofeminism and intersectionality, I examine how the intersectional identities of these women exacerbate their experiences of backlash and the social conditions that shape their responses. Through this research, I draw attention to the gendered nature of digital spaces that are embedded in society, and how they are being used to censor women’s speech and police their actions to ensure conformity with gendered norms. I use semi-structured interviews to center the voices of 16 African women from Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya. My findings reveal that the everyday acts of these women are a form of activism that makes them targets of backlash online and this challenges dominant narratives of what activism is and who is an activist. My findings reveal that when these women decide to either respond with silence or with words, their identities, and social circumstances become vital to how they make this decision. In this way, these women can either choose silence as a subverted agentic act that benefits them but emboldens the abusers or choose to engage the abuser risking further backlash. Through my research, I call for the rethinking of silence not as helplessness but as a subverted agentic act that women use to protect themselves as well as safeguard their activism online. This research contributes to the literature on online backlash by focusing on African women in Low- and Middle-Income countries. This research is distinct from other studies that examine the gendered impact of technology using the technofeminism theory because it critiques the theory by calling attention to how its emphasis on external factors makes it difficult to effectively capture the nuances, and intersectional lives of African women, and how technologies impact them.

## Relevance to Development Studies

Digital spaces have not only changed how people communicate but have also become a site for contests between social and political structures, so much so that they now dictate how individuals interact with others (Smith *et al*, 2013, p. 29). The ability of these spaces to inform, mobilise, raise awareness, and collectively organise toward change beyond the confines of a geographical location bolsters women’s ability to challenge patriarchal norms and other forms of injustice (Ajaja, 2023, pp.111-118; Wodajo, 2021, p.227). These spaces provide an avenue to amplify voices, circulate them beyond their countries of origin, attract international actors, and appeal to transnational audiences (Sorce, and Dumitric, 2022, p.157). While digital spaces hold several advantages, by providing the space for women to organise they also expose these women to harm (UNFPA, No Date, p.4-8; The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021). These harms include backlash which takes the form of abuse, threats, misogynist attacks, and harassment while offering protection through anonymity to the perpetrators (Dixon, 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022, p.7). According to Benslimane, these backlashes reflect a ‘deeper, systemic issue that seeks to silence’ the women fighting against the patriarchal system that oppresses them (2024, p.5).

These systems of oppression impede the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality (Castro and Meira, 2024). The rise of social movements in digital spaces

---

<sup>1</sup> This phrase was coined by Mütterlein and Fuchs, (2019).

for gender equality now faces new threats enabled by technology that threaten women's right to hold and express their opinions. This research investigates the lives of women who face backlash in digital spaces and are targeted for daring to challenge gender norms and their responses (Allen, 2023). This research contributes to the broader issues of gender equality, the social impact of technology, and democratic values.

## **Keywords**

Digital Spaces, Activism, African Women, Identity, Backlash, Silence, Subverted Agency.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

“..the streets aren’t just the ones we walk on but the ones we scroll through.”  
Marwa Azelmat (cited in Benslimane *et al.* 2024, p.5).

## 1.1 Why am I Doing this Research?

The defining moment in my career was joining the International Federation of Women Lawyers, Nigeria (FIDA) as an Advocacy Manager. Leveraging digital spaces like Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, became vital to the organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic because they were now more than tools used to create awareness about our work. In the wake of the pandemic, these spaces became the only means we could provide information, real-time support, and response to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

As part of our celebration of the International Women’s Day, themed *DigitALL*, FIDA organised training for women’s groups, and civil society organisations on leveraging digital spaces for advocacy, learning, and finding communities. A few weeks later, the nude video of a female politician was shared on Facebook. In response, I drafted a press statement<sup>2</sup> on behalf of FIDA which was released on Facebook condemning the act and calling for legal accountability. Soon after this statement was released, every member of the group who had shared it and individuals who commented were faced with what I term backlash which included bullying, harassment, derogatory remarks, or faced with threats of rape, death, and the exposure of their private details to the public. In response, FIDA permanently shut down the comment sections. It has been more than a year now, and FIDA has not made another post lending its voice to any form of activism. ***She fell silent!***

When faced with backlash the women behind FIDA could no longer respond as a group, they had to negotiate their responses based on their identities and contexts, and the product of this negotiation was Silence! In a space that provided visibility to amplify the voices of women challenging patriarchal norms, a group of women faced harm and could only respond through silence. People often consider silence as cowardice and helplessness but in this research, I examine the social conditions that make women like the ones in FIDA choose silence when faced with backlash.

In this study, I focus on silence as an agentic act by African women as a way to re-center their voices because, in the accounts of African history in Western discourses, African women are portrayed as subordinate – submissive, subdued, passive, and subjugated’ ignoring ‘ordinary mothers and young women’ whose acts of resistance and activism were organised differently (Serbin and Rasoanaivo-Randriamamonjy, 2015). As a Nigerian woman, I choose to interrogate activism in digital spaces by African women, and how these spaces expose them to backlash. Particularly because while several studies have examined backlash online there has been limited research on online backlash in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) in Africa (Dunn, 2020, p.1; Backe *et al.*, 2018).

---

<sup>2</sup> In this statement, FIDA demanded that the video be taken down; that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) (agency saddled with the administration of the Cybercrimes Act (2015) the only Law that criminalises the Act) prosecute the offenders. FIDA called on Facebook to take punitive measures by deleting the video and banning the poster and all who had shared it from using their space (Facebook).

This research is informed by the response of FIDA to the backlash and its effect on activism(s) challenging patriarchal norms, gender injustice, and seeking systemic change. I also feel responsible for what had happened hence, I feel obligated to do this research, perhaps bringing this to light will provide me with some closure.

My goal in this research is to call for the rethinking of silence as a response to backlash using the lens of subverted agency (Chib *et al.*, 2022, pp.458-459). To achieve this, I explore the everyday interactions of 16 African women in digital spaces. In doing so, I heed Saba Mahmood's call for new development agendas to understand agency within the social context that restrains or allows for individual actions (2008, p.224).

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Digital technology has become a vital part of our everyday lives shaping our interactions with one another (Chib and Chen, 2011). These technologies have made it possible to connect digital and physical spaces. This interconnection blurs the line between these different spaces (Mütterlein and Fuchs, 2019, p.126). Digital spaces like Twitter (X), FaceBook, WhatsApp, Instagram *etcetera* have transformed socialisation, communication, collaboration, and social interaction. However, it also provides the luxury of anonymity and wider reach which has been utilised to perpetrate violence against women (VAW) at unprecedented levels (Faith, 2022). This anonymity makes it easy for people to harass others because they do not have to live with the consequences of being identified (Paulin, *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the wide reach of sharing information digitally serves perpetrators with the virality needed to exert harm on the victim through bullying, threats, hate speech, *etcetera* (*ibid*; Akpan (a), 2024 p.2).

Although men and women are exposed to harm online, women are disproportionately at more risk because they are often targeted by online misogyny amongst other forms of harm (Stevens *et al.*, 2024, p.1abou; Duggan, 2017). Women also experience more negative psychological impacts when faced with harm online in comparison to men (EIGE, 2004, p.7). Furthermore, when these backlashes occur online, it can force the victims to reduce their interaction or avoid these spaces altogether, and this negatively impacts women's rights to participate in public life (Abou-Habib, *et al.*, 2023; EIGE, 2004, p.7).

Despite the evidence on the negative impacts, there has been more research on these backlashes focusing on high-income countries in comparison with research that explores this menace in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) in Africa (Dunn, 2020, p.1; Backe *et al.*, 2018 cited in Akpan, 2024(a), p.2-3). In LMICs like Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya, the prevalence of abuse and harassment online is inextricably linked to the high rates of gendered injustices supported by prevailing patriarchal practices that are currently being challenged by gendered movements (Sheikh and Rogers, 2024). These technologies amplify women's voices in challenging the existing social structures and norms while provoking a backlash that leads to harm in these spaces. This backlash is a response to the increase in women living in defiance of norms and asserting their rights. These women have become models influencing other women in these digital spaces to challenge patriarchal norms (Alichie, 2022). With movements for gender equity becoming popular in these spaces, they pose a risk to existing power structures; hence the backlash that women face are attempts to maintain the status quo (*ibid*). Based on this background, this research seeks to examine how women navigate their interactions in these spaces when they face backlash and its impact on their advocacy against patriarchal systems and social norms.

## 1.3 Concepts and Constructs Used in this Research

I utilise several concepts and social constructs in this study, and it is necessary to provide some contextual explanation as a guide for the other sections of this research paper.

### 1.3.1 Silence as Subverted Agency

In this research, I consider silence as an agentic act because it is deliberately used as a digital strategy in response to online backlash (Glenn, 2004). However, I situate this silence within the social conditions that make it meaningful for African women using digital spaces. For example, when FIDA condemned the exposure of a woman's nude videos, they did this as a group, but the backlash targeted their identities which made them choose silence. When women choose silence in the face of backlash it becomes a subverted agentic act because it is beneficial to them in the way that it helps them protect themselves, but it potentially harms the collective because it emboldens the abusers (Chib *et al.*, 2022, pp.458-459). And so, as I discuss silence in digital spaces, I am calling attention to the social conditions that produce it.

### 1.3.2 Activism by African Women

Western narratives of activism emphasises organised and collective actions that are geared towards political or social change (Mwaura, 2017, pp.7-10) These narratives have become so dominant that they determine who should be considered an activist and what actions are considered activism. It is these narratives that invisibilise the contributions of African women who resisted colonialism, military dictatorship, and other forms of oppression. The unconventional ways these women sought social change hardly fit into the strict Western conceptualisations (Adeola, 2018; Agbashi, 2021). For example, it was hard to understand why women in Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania would sing 'as a weapon of protest and defiance' when historical Western activism and social movements led by women such as the *Suffrage Rights* movements utilised 'state campaigns, court battles, and petitions to Congress' (Marino, No Date).

In this research, I frame activism beyond these Western narratives in a way that allows me to situate activism in the African context. This way I can question the intersectional meanings of individual actions that would otherwise be invisibilised because they appear too trivial and are unorganised. I do not want to erroneously use a single frame to measure what is activism and what it is not. By reading meaning into acts in their social contexts I can center marginalised voices like women simply identifying as a feminist or non-heterosexual in a society that considers them bad influences and unlawful because these everyday acts though 'trivial' would emerge as activism in the same way that seeking policy changes would be regarded as activism. I am not trying to categorise every daily act as activism but to recognise how these invisible, trivalised acts challenge existing norms (Martin *et al.*, 2007, pp. 6-10).

As such when searching for activism and social movements in African societies one must look for "informal networks, spontaneous, decultural practices, and everyday acts of resistance in the forms of community organising, story-telling, and mutual support that are embedded in cultural contexts and life experiences and these often go unnoticed" (Goredema, 2010, p.35). Depending on the context sometimes African women engaging online do not begin by seeking change at the societal level for some it is about circumventing

traditional media to have their voices heard in these spaces. It is also important to note that even online, established norms about how activism is organised and mobilised have also begun to change. (Valenzuela, *et al.* 2012; Sorce and Dumitrica, 2022). Based on the discussions above, the forms of activism in digital spaces that I investigate go beyond organised efforts at achieving societal change to visible or silent acts of everyday resistance in these spaces often found in the way these women live their lives contrary to what the prevailing norms permit.

### 1.3.2 1.4 Research Questions

Using the lens of subverted agency, how do women respond to the online backlash they face as a result of participating in activism?

*Sub Question 1a: What strategies do women as everyday individuals use in responding to these backlashes?*

*Sub Question 1b: What strategies do women as activists use in responding to these backlashes?*

*Sub Question 1c: What are the effects of this backlash on activism in general?*

## 1.5 Justification of this Research

Access to digital technology has been a recurring theme in discourses on women's rights, public participation, and empowerment (UNFPA, No Date, p.3). It has also been instrumental to individual agency which is the ability to gain power and the resources to fulfill their potential (Sen,1982). Women have been encouraged to embrace technology and increasingly use digital spaces to assert their agency, demand their rights, and draw attention to their causes. Narratives such as the above, digital spaces are only presented as empowering because they support agentic acts such as the freedom to express opinions without restraints. However, research shows that individuals do not always have a positive and empowering experience in their use of digital spaces and their experiences are also dependent on their social contexts (Chib *et al.*, 2022, pp.458-459). To further corroborate this, the Global Partnership (2023) and The EIU (2021) in their research note that 85% of women globally have witnessed online violence. In another report, the Institute of Development Studies, notes that 16-58% of women have experienced violence online and their identities exacerbate their experiences. Because they do not experience 'life in silos', their identities and gender intersects to produce distinctive forms of oppression and discrimination in these spaces (Allen, 2023; EIGE, 2022, p.7; Crenshaw, 2013; Lorde, 1984). As a result of these intersections, when women respond to the harm they face online, they do so with a consciousness of what their social contexts permit and what the backlash would be if they go beyond these limits (Peter, 2003). This consciousness influences their choice of digital strategies as they navigate their interactions in these spaces, and often, this results in subverted agentic acts (Chib, *et al.*, 2022 pp.459-463).

Women are often restrained in their exercise of agency depending on their social contexts and identities which can either shield them from, expose them to, or better equip them to face backlashes that result from their interactions in these spaces (Chib, *et al.*, 2022 pp.459-463; Plan Canada, 2022). As such, activists may be socially positioned to use digital spaces to demand social change and exercise their agency verbally by responding to backlashes. For everyday individuals, the exercise of their agency can be subverted, thereby encouraging 'silence' in the face of injustice even when it reproduces social norms that allow for their continued marginalisation (Chib *et al.*, 2022 pp.458-459). These individuals often weigh their actions against socio-structural norms and act in conformity to avoid the backlash or prevent it from escalating (Chib, 2022 *et al.*, p.468; Dunn, 2020 p.4; Butler, 1997, p.87). In this context,

when women use silence as a strategy to protect themselves from harm or to avoid harassment, it benefits them personally as individuals, but it can embolden their abuser to continue to harass them and other women.

Hence, while some women (activists or everyday individuals) have found it useful to continue to use their voice even when faced with backlash, some have found it more beneficial to exercise their agency in these spaces by choosing silent acts that are not limited to self-censoring, blocking or leaving the space entirely (Ging and Park, 2023; Dunn, 2020 p.4). As individuals navigate their social contexts, they use digital strategies such as deleting a comment, restricting profile access, restricting their comment sections, or leaving a digital space entirely. I consider these digital strategies which are responses to backlash as silent agentic acts. This is because while the use of silent acts may be interpreted as the non-involvement of these women in activism, they still point to their resistance to social norms that police them whether this was the intention or not.

With the inter-sectional lens of subverted agency, I aim to highlight how social contexts affect interactions and inform silent agentic acts as digital strategies in response to backlash. By studying how these spaces become sites of power contests that reproduce violence, I aim to discover how women in Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya navigate backlash and its impact on social movements in general. This research will provide the needed evidence to inform practical measures to keep digital spaces free from violence making them safe for women.

## **1.6 Organisation of the Research**

This research is divided into five chapters. In chapter one I introduce the research problem and my interest in the topic. The research objective and questions are also highlighted in this chapter as a guide for this research. I begin the second chapter begins with a clarification of the theoretical framework on which this research is based. In this chapter, I review existing literature on digital violence, social movements, activism, and agency.

By highlighting the gaps in the literature, I also position this research to fill those gaps. Chapter three of this research contains a detailed narrative of the research methods, recruitment strategy, and coding process. In this chapter, I reflect on who I am in this research and the reason for choosing to study African women in Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya. In chapter four, I present the research findings analyse these findings using the theoretical frameworks. In the final chapter, I provide present conclusions and suggestion for further studies.

# Chapter 2 Activism in Digital Spaces: Exploring the Relationship Between Technology and Society

## 2.1 Activism in Digital Spaces: Select Examples

Some notable social movements such as the women's suffrage movement, anti-apartheid movements, Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and MeToo movement have their roots in collective and individual actions (UNICEF, No date, p.2). In the same way, digital spaces have become useful in helping citizens demand accountability from their government and be heard on issues that were not prominent in traditional media. (Ajisafe, Ojo, and Monyani, 2021 cited in Bosh and Roberts, 2023, p.99). These spaces blur geographical boundaries increasing reach, reducing the cost of communication, and mobilisation. (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman, 2012). For example, it was used by citizens in the Middle East and North Africa as an outlet for the Arab Spring uprising. Social movements which include #YellowUmbrella #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #RejectFiance-Bill2024, #FreeSenegal, and #EndSARS, illustrate how marginalised groups mobilise and resist whilst demanding social justice and democracy.

### 2.1.1 #YellowUmbrellaMovement (Hong Kong)

In 1997 Hong Kong was handed over by the British to China with a special agreement termed 'one country, two systems' to ensure some form of independence including choosing its leaders. China continued to dictate the political trajectory of Hong Kong, and this instigated digital activism against this oppression in 2013. In 2014, citizens of Hong Kong were denied the political right to choose a leader (Chief Executive) by the Chinese government (BBC, 2019). This led to a series of protests across Hong Kong territory, where citizens used yellow umbrellas- a symbol of women's suffrage, to shield themselves from the teargas used by the Police to disperse them (Hume and Park, 2014). Like the Nigerian #EndSARS protest, the Yellow Umbrella movement had no 'leader' and this can be attributed to the risk of prosecution for organising protests. Although the protests were largely organised using digital spaces, they were done to circumvent state control over local media firms (Shao, 2019).

According to Agur and Frisch, the use of digital spaces in the protests created an online space for activism (2019). Its success was in the ability of the protest leaders to document their actions, provide justifications while creating their narrative of the movement in these digital spaces. While their digital activism did not lead to 'immediate change' it provided the needed publicity that shifted public perception, galvanising several movements for social change since 2014. The use of Umbrellas in the offline protests was a way of 'preserving their privacy because photos of protestors were being taken and sent to the communist party' (Lovejoy and Antaran, 2014). With the visibility of the digital spaces, activists could no longer evade state actors resulting in the conviction of at least nine activists for their role in the movements (Kuo, 2019).

### 2.1.2 #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSARS (United States of America (USA) and Nigeria)

On the 26th of February 2012, an African American teen, Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by the Police in Sanford, Florida. Even though Trayvon was unarmed, his shooter

Zimmerman was acquitted. This acquittal sparked conversations in both digital and physical spaces propelling three black women to create a Black-centered movement called Black Lives Matter (Stanford, no date). This movement became a rallying call, leading to protests in digital and physical spaces. The movement has been active in speaking up against police brutality in the USA. However, with the brutal murder of George Floyd by the Police on May 25, 2020, which went viral in digital spaces, rallying cries emerged from around the world with individuals protesting police brutality. It is in the wake of these protests that the Nigerian #EndSARS movement which had already begun online, gained momentum for protests in physical spaces.

In 2016 #EndSARS, an anti-police brutality movement began on Twitter (X). This was part of the repeated calls to the Nigerian government to address issues of police brutality, especially by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)<sup>3</sup> (Ekoh and George, 2021). Ogala (2020) reports that on the 3rd of October, “a video showing a Police officer-SARS shooting a young man dead, then proceeding to drive away with the man’s vehicle, went viral.” This sparked several conversations mostly on X and Facebook, about personal experiences of police brutality by the SARS Unit. These trend of events and the virality of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, culminated in the revitalisation of the Nigerian #EndSARS movement which had begun in 2016. The rekindling of the #EndSARS movement led to nationwide protests in both digital and physical spaces.

The interactions in these digital spaces especially on X were spearheaded by a group of women organised under the Feminist Coalition (FemCo). While there are several accounts of who started the movement, the role of feminist groups like FemCo was vital to the virality of the movements as well as supporting the protests offline. This was made possible because of their ability to leverage social power in navigating a complex political terrain like Nigeria to organise protests demanding justice despite the patriarchal systems of exclusion. Furthermore, the significant nature of their efforts blurred the distinction between both spaces. As FemCo pooled financial resources online, they also had resources in physical spaces to provide medical support and legal services. During the protest, “friendships were forged, alliances made, and even some “enemies” ditched their hatred for one another and decided to work together” (Olafusi, 2021). Relying on this support, Femco continued to spread awareness on issues like sexual identity, gendered roles, and stereotypes, and this was not received well. As a result, they began to face backlash from the same community that had once supported them in their activism against police brutality.

### **2.1.3 #RejectFinanceBill2024 (Kenya)**

In May 2024, the Kenyan Parliament sought to pass the Finance Bill 2024. The proposed Bill was aimed at raising \$2.5 billion in government revenue by increasing taxes on mobile money transfers, cooking oil, and products for female hygiene (Munga, 2024). The Bill, if subsequently passed would have substantially increased the cost of menstrual hygiene products, pushing more girls and women into period poverty (*ibid*; Olingo, 2024).

Kenyans organised using digital spaces and staged protests which began in the capital city of Nairobi and escalated to several cities in Kenya. Digital spaces like X(Twitter), Facebook, and Tik-Tok were used to share explanatory videos to educate others on the implications of the Bill. This was aimed at garnering support as well as reaching local and

---

<sup>3</sup>The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) is a special police unit under the Nigeria Police Force with the responsibility of fighting violent crimes such as armed robberies, kidnapping, and murders. However, the unit has been accused of renegeing on their primary responsibility which entails protecting lives and property to destroying lives and taking property.

international audiences. ‘Illegal’ measures were also adopted which involved the sharing of private phone numbers of politicians on digital spaces and asking citizens to hold them accountable were also employed. These isolated incidents in these spaces as well as offline protests led to the eventual withdrawal of the Bill from the Parliament. Kenyans utilised digital spaces in their fight against unfair economic policies and the broader issues of social justice (*ibid*). Underneath this success, Kenyan activists became exposed to significant risks because of their online visibility. This included being targeted by the authorities and surveillance (Rights and Security International, 2024). These sites also became spaces for intimidation where they encountered bullying and targeted harassment and heightened their vulnerability to harm both online and offline (*ibid*).

#### **2.2.4 #FreeSenegal (Senegal)**

Former Senegalese President Macky Sall clamped down on digital spaces during his tenure. In his opinion, these spaces were “new forms of disruption of public order and national distabilisation”. By 2018 Senegal had passed the Electronic Communications Code to further stifle digital activism (Dione, 2024).

In 2024, Senegalese citizens used digital spaces to share their fears and dissenting opinions on the decision to postpone the presidential elections using the hashtag FreeSenegal. This was met with a crackdown, leading to the shutdown of access to the internet in Senegal. Despite these, Senegalese citizens had spread enough awareness and mounted pressure that led to the electoral polls held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2024 which ousted the former president (*ibid*). These examples cited in the previous paragraphs challenge the perceptions like that of Livingston (2016) that equate activism in digital spaces to “slacktivism,” a term that implies that simply liking, sharing, or commenting has little real-world impact and in that way threatens ‘real activism’ offline (Willingham, 2018). However, these recent events point to the fact that political leaders can succumb to online pressure. They demonstrate that even small changes initiated online can lead to substantial outcomes. It is important to note that while these digital movements have been successful in Senegal they were also weaponised by state actors and private individuals to suppress dissenting voices. It also exposed activists to state-sanctioned violence ranging from deportation to illegal arrests (Africtivistes, 2023).

It is clear from the examples of social movements in the preceding section, that despite the utilitarian value of digital spaces in activism and social movements, the threats of violence, arbitrary arrests, and censorship remain an issue. Again, these reinforce the notion that these spaces are not separate from the violence that exists in society but are a part of the continuum of violence (Abou-Habib, 2023, p.481; CIVICUS,2023; Castro and Meira, 2024).

## **2.2 Gendered Activism in Digital Spaces**

In this section, I examine #metoo and #BringBackOurGirls which are two examples of activism that focused on gender issues and were amplified in digital spaces gaining global attention.

### **2.2.1 #MeToo movement (Globalised)**

In 2006, Taran Burke a survivor of sexual assault heralded the phrase, “me too” in her fight against perpetrators of sexual violence she is quoted saying,

“I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like

she was all alone, and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper (...) me too" (Malefakia, 2022).

Emboldened by her action, other women began to speak up against sexual assault, naming their perpetrators and encouraging others to speak up. The phrase, "me too" was widely used by survivors demanding legal action against their perpetrators. Utilising X (Twitter) as a space of mobilisation, millions of tweets emanated from all over the world by survivors signaling their courage to speak up (*ibid*). While it had a widespread impact on breaking the culture of silence among survivors, in South Asian countries like India the social taboo around the topic and the emphasis on "purity culture" prevented this from happening the women largely remained silent because they could not exercise their agency by speaking up without putting themselves at risk (Kundu (2024). While this might be interpreted as their preference for maintaining the status quo that leads to their oppression in the first place, it is important to note that individual acts are not always isolated, but they are linked with their social contexts which include their experiences, the experiences of others, and interpersonal relations etc (*ibid*). As such individual actions will often be limited by social expectations.

### **2.2.2 #BringBackourGirls (Nigeria)**

This movement began in 2014 after the kidnap of over 300 schoolgirls by the Islamic sect Boko Haram (Atela, and Ojebode, No date). This movement was aimed at getting the Nigerian government to admit that this event happened and then proceed to secure the release of all the girls kidnapped (Adebisi, 2020). The movement was organised both in digital and physical spaces.

Digital spaces helped to give the movement global attention and mounted pressure on the Nigerian government which had declined to acknowledge that these girls had been kidnapped. While the virality of the movement online and offline did not lead to the release of all the schoolgirls, they transformed the efforts of rescuing the girls from individual acts by families trying to scrap money to buy their daughters' freedom into an 'international response'. However, it is important to note that to date several schoolgirls are still missing and many more have been abducted which is indicative of a gendered pattern to the attacks (Parkinson, 2021).

## **2.3 Digital Spaces as Sites for Power: Encountering Backlash**

As digital spaces provide new platforms for women have begun to use these spaces to get publicity and attention and pressurise governments to 'address' social and political issues (Ajaja, 2023, pp.117-118; Anthonio and Roberts, 2023, pp.85-86). And while these spaces become sites for "citizen engagement, activism, and female organising" (Ajaja, 2023, p.119) they are not value-free and double as sites for competing interests between actors (Wodajo, 2021, p.227). These spaces have become social environments for relations of power that are shaped by social context, cultural norms, and everyday practices (Foucault, 1982).

Ganzer (2014) in his research, noted that activists have not only come under attack in digital spaces but that these spaces have been used to discredit them. These attacks include pushing a narrative of a man-hating agenda, especially for activists who focus on gender issues. These attacks end up jeopardising legitimate communities of support that these groups have built. This ploy was adopted on the 23rd of October 2013 by 4chan, a men's rights advocate group that launched Operation Lollipop. The operation which was aimed at spreading anti-feminist hashtags like #EndFathersDay and #WhitesCantBeRaped also destroyed alliances of support to feminist movements by misrepresenting their cause (Ganzer, 2014). Besides 4chan, there are several Men's rights groups and incels that are a part of a much

larger set of male supremacist, anti-feminist, and misogynists that exist online. They share ideas online and often claim that there is a “war on men” and so its followers who have learned about male supremacist ideas must always attack the feminine forces that oppress men. In digital spaces, they do this using what Butler terms “derogatory speech”, to cast aspersions on women and this includes anti-feminist rhetoric, invalidating the testimonies of sexual abuse survivors amongst others (1997, p.2). Furthermore, some of these incels call for the abuse of women as well as gender non-conforming individuals as they infiltrate groups witch-hunting their targets online and offline.

It is clear from the above, that the systemic backlash that women face in these spaces is often coordinated and aims to spread misogynistic ideals while attempting to silence women who challenge societal norms. This backlash is not just a response to the efforts of women who resist patriarchy, but it is the continuum of violence that women experience in their everyday lives (Benslimane *et al.* 2024, p.5; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022, p.7; UNFPA, No Date, p.2). With technology, the violence is exacerbated, because perpetrators can hide under the cloak of anonymity to evade accountability, while algorithms make harmful content that vilify women go viral (Bockarie, 2024; Allen, 2023).

In Canada, women were noted to entertain fears for the backlashes they are likely to receive when they engage in activism. It is pertinent to note that these women included those who took an active part in activism and those who simply watched or performed actions like sharing posts and liking these posts (Plan Canada, 2023). In essence, even when women were not directly attacked, their experience of the attack on other women affected their ability to exercise their agency and take part in activism or support social movements in the way they would have. And so, even when they exercise their agency they are often subverted because they appear silent or non-participatory.

Another notable instance is when Khadija who began the #ArewaMeToo movement in Nigeria, shared her story of intimate partner violence to encourage other women to speak up. Sharing her story led to the creation of safe spaces online to help survivors, it also led to physical protests demanding policy changes (Nuhu, 2020). As a result, some northern states domesticated the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act. However, on the flip side, Khadija and other women who shared their stories were faced with backlashes ranging from harassment to death threats. Hauwa, one of the protesters who was vocal in these spaces was being described as an “apostate, no longer a Muslim, too vulgar, a prostitute” (Nuhu, 2020). The efforts of Khadija and Hauwa at challenging societal norms that made women ‘shameful victims’ of sexual abuse were also undermined by incels that spread claims that their objective was to promote homosexuality which is a criminal offense in Nigeria.

A similar experience was recorded by Kundu (2024) who noted that trolls mocked women who broke the silence by speaking up about their experiences in the #MeToo movement. There were coordinated attacks on these women which were aimed at discrediting their experiences. In China, the movement was met with verbal attacks and censorship. In Italy, these survivors faced several discrediting narratives of their stories, and they were described as “liars” (Jones, 2023). These similar experiences of misogynistic attacks reflect the usual resistance to social changes that threaten social norms, practices, and hierarchies (*ibid*).

During the #ENDSARS movement, the women behind FemCo faced state intimidation ranging from debit restrictions on their accounts, and seizure of international passports to restrict their movements and forestall any opportunity to escape the State (Olowoporoku, 2021; Awojulgbe, 2020). Oyosoro *et al.* (2022) notes that digital spaces became sites for spreading misogynist remarks using hashtags opposing the ideas of the Feminist Coalition which were challenging gendered norms. To further clamp down on the movement, access to FemCo website was restricted within Nigeria and only accessible via a virtual private network (Native, 2020). The group also suffered fraud allegations aimed at illegitimising their

cause as a result, alliances that had been forged especially with men began to “wither away” (Olowoporoku, 2021). Faniyi describes this backlash as virtual backstabbing which was executed by misogynist groups online. In her opinion, patriarchal African societies deny women political and social agency and shape public reactions when the communication or actions of these women do not conform to the prevailing norms (Faniyi, 2024).

Furthermore, the live video by Obianuju Udeh (DJ Switch) on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, which I watched live as it was being aired on Instagram, captured Nigerian soldiers shooting at unarmed protesters, was marked by Instagram as fake. Several fake accounts sprung up sharing phony news about the protests, and the number of people who died. All of this affected the publicity coupled with the suppression of the reach of this message by the algorithms. All of these, in my opinion, provided leverage for the Nigerian government to deny the alleged killings, perhaps because they did not face pressure from the international community as with #BringBackOurGirls. In the words of DJ Switch, ‘while the soldiers were picking their shells, we were running around picking their shells too because we wanted proof’. While this provided visibility, DJ Switch went into hiding for months to avoid being tracked down by State forces (Okonofua, 2021).

In the preceding sections I have provided examples of activism in digital spaces from global movements to movements in African countries like Kenya, Senegal and Nigeria. In the next section of this research, I present the theories which guide my interpretation of the interconnected nature of these spaces. I also use these theories as a guide to interpret the harm that women face in these spaces as they challenge social norms.

## 2.3 TechnoFeminism Theory

In the 1990s and 2000s, the narrative of technology as a tool of gendered empowerment that could help women live beyond the strict constructs of gendered roles began to emerge. In essence, with technology, women could be free to be who they wanted to be (Haraway, 1997; Haraway, 1989; and Wajcman, 2004, p.16). Technological innovations such as Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram *etcetera* have made it possible to host social interactions virtually while staying connected to physical spaces. In these spaces women can participate in public forums to communicate their demands individually or join groups to do the same beyond the boundaries of their geographical locations (Wodajo, 2021, p.227; Huyer and Sikoska, 2003 p.1). However, all these have come at a price which is the exposure of women to harm as opposed to being ‘empowering’ (Ging and Park, 2023). For this study, I rely on the Technofeminism theory to explain the gendered relationship between technology and society.

According to the Technofeminism theory, technological innovations do not exist outside of society, but they have become part of society where contests over interests are an everyday reality (Wajcman, 2009). As such while the use of technological innovations like digital spaces has transformed communication, they are always in the making and so they do not only shape and influence us, but our interactions are also influencing it (Arevalo, 2024; Lindgren, 2017, p.7). In the way that Wajcman views technology, she emphasises its lack of neutrality and its subjectivity to social contexts. And so, to critically engage with technology the focus must go beyond women’s access to technology but also examine the manifestations of gendered power relations (2009, pp.144-146). These gendered relations manifest in a broad spectrum that stems from societal biases that make technology the site for the production and reproduction of patriarchy. What Wajcman proposes is a different way to understand our relationship with technology beyond machines by paying attention to how it has become part of our everyday lives and is no different from our offline societies.

### 2.3.1 TechnoFeminism in the African Context

In my attempt to find a suitable framework for theorising the use of digital technology in African societies, I found a huge gap, one that authors like Mwaura (2017), Nyabola (2024), Enyinnaya and Arthur (2024) also mention in their research. In noting this difficulty, I do not in any way imply that the existing theories are irrelevant to examine the use of digital technologies. My point is that the context where these theories are developed is influenced by histories and realities that differ from African history, political, and social culture (Mwaura, 2016, p.4). Even though Wajcman's technofeminism theory provides a useful lens to understand the gendered relationship between technology and society. It is important to mention that she emphasises external factors like social and economic status as having the capacity to influence how women find beneficial use of technological innovations like digital spaces. In the African context, the difficulty lies in interpreting these social and economic barriers, in a way that captures the reality of every African woman who uses technology, because these barriers exist at both the infrastructural, and individual level. For example, while the women in Tea farms in Kenya may lack access to technology because of their low economic status. The woman in Senegal may not have access to technology because her husband forbids it. The Nigerian woman living in the urban area, may only interact with digital technology by hiding her identity. As such the barriers that Wajcman refers to, do not effectively capture these nuances, because it views access as static, as opposed to being complex, and intersectional (Banks, 2011, pp. 16-17, Haas cited in Alexander and Rhodes, 2018, p.419). This static understanding of access makes technofeminism limited in helping me contextually examine the lives of African women who use digital spaces (Nyabola, 2024, p.98).

It is this gap that makes it necessary to use intersectionality to examine how women experience backlash ranging from threats of violence, arbitrary arrests, and censorship masquerading as bots and content moderation as they use digital spaces (Abou-Habib, 2023, p.481; CIVICUS, 2023). In the way that African women experience backlash western categorisations of who should be considered an activist and who is not becomes irrelevant because the everyday use of these spaces by African women in several ways challenge patriarchal norms even when this was not the intention. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality becomes useful to analyse how the interactions of these women in digital spaces intersect with their identities and exacerbates their experiences of backlash (EIGE, 2022, p.7; Crenshaw (1989).

Because there is no single way to be an African woman, their multiple identities overlap to create distinctive experiences of backlash online (Nyabola, 2024, p.98). These backlashes are what UNFPA considers massified form contemporary hostility in everyday online spaces that are normalised and considered part of being in these spaces' (UNFPA, No Date, pp.2-8; Castillo-Esparcia, 2023). This reveals that digital spaces are not neutral, but they are actively involved in the abuse of women, because they also offer anonymity, that shields the perpetrators and helps them evade accountability for their actions (Faith, 2022; Paulin *et al* 2021; Allen,2023). Furthermore, content moderation tools, bots, and algorithms actively participate in excluding women by not taking their complaints of abuse seriously (*ibid*). In this way, technology (digital spaces) is both a source and a consequence of gendered relations (Wajcman, 2010, p.1).

In the context of my study, I cannot just view African women as a homogenous group whose experiences of backlash in digital spaces can be understood through a single lens because, in these spaces, they are constantly navigating multiple identities (Lorde, 1984). These women do not just experience backlash because they are women; it is their identity as activists and everyday women marked by other identities within their social context (as refugees, trans-women, unmarried women, married women, divorced women, and entrepreneurs) that determines the backlash they face online. Identities become important to understand how

the backlash these women face in digital spaces reflects broader cycles of violence that create unique experiences of oppression or privilege that influence their response (*ibid*, UNFPA, No Date, p.2).

In the next section of this research, I explain the how I select the women whom I interview for this study. I am guided by the theories and the literature in the preceding section of this research paper to develop the tools which will guide my conversations with my participants.

# Chapter 3 Gathering Knowledge from Marginalised Lives

## 3.0 Recruitment of Participants

In this research, I used qualitative methodology guided by an intersectional framework to investigate the different identities of the women and how it exacerbated the backlash they faced online. The use of qualitative interviewing was informed by the social nature of the research (Hennink *et al*, 2020, p.11).

The recruitment was carried out in four stages. The first stage was a purposive sampling of members of FIDA. Despite sharing a message asking for willing participants and contacting members who had experienced online backlash, all members declined the interview. The second phase of recruitment was executed using digital purposive sampling. This involved scouting Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram for women who were engaging in gendered discourses and had faced abuse online (backlash is how I term the abuse they face because it is not an isolated act). I sent direct messages to about 10 women, and none responded. All these women were popular activists and celebrities. Now that I think about it, perhaps they did not respond because I was unknown to them or because the conversations would touch on aspects of their personal lives that they did not feel comfortable sharing.

The use of digital purposive sampling was necessary in the third phase of recruitment because it guided my selection of women groups and mini bloggers who were simply sharing information about gendered issues like domestic violence, sexual abuse, and societal expectations of women. I went through the comments sections and identified women whose comments were attracting ‘derogatory’ speech. In doing this, I developed a list of 35 women who were both activists and everyday individuals who were just interacting in these spaces. I went through their social media pages and selected the women who were receiving backlash that was tailored to their identities. From these multiple respondent groups of everyday individuals and activists, I sampled the interview guide with five women, the results of these interactions helped me update the interview guide. The initial interview guide was developed using my knowledge of the literature (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Edwards and Holland, 2023). After the sampling, I selected 20 women for the interviews and sent them invitations for the research, but I received only 9 responses. The request to participate in the interviews was communicated to the participants using WhatsApp messages, email, Twitter (X) messages, and Facebook Messenger. I began my interactions with these women by sharing a personal story, explaining why I was conducting this research. This encouraged open conversations and made the participants feel safe enough to talk about their experiences (Holmes, 2020).

In the fourth phase of recruitment, I used the snowball method asking participants to recommend other women who had experienced backlash in digital spaces. This was necessary to communicate with participants who had adopted ‘silence’ by blocking their comment section and restricting who could contact them on Facebook Messenger and X (Twitter). The introduction from participants who knew them and had access to their pages helped me interview them.

The general selection of the 16 women who participated in this study was guided by their use of digital spaces, the experience of backlash which was tailored to their identity, and engagement in gendered discussions on these spaces, (McPherson *et al*, 2001). Participants gave written consent and oral consent before the interviews (Appendix one). The interviews were recorded and stored in compliance with ethical guidelines. To provide confidentiality for the participants, their identity was replaced with pseudonyms (Babbie, 2020).

In answering the main research question: *Using the lens of subverted agency, how do women respond to the online backlash they face as a result of participating in activism?* I interviewed the participants on five major topics. To set the tone of the research, I began with introductory questions to get to know the participants' background and their knowledge of the social problem. For women who identified as activists the introductory question centered on the social issues they have been involved in and their choice for advocating on such issues and not others. When speaking to everyday women for the first time after familiarisation, my questions focused on mapping their interactions online. Some of the questions include –

- a) Can you tell me about your interactions online?
- b) Do you engage in critical opinion sharing?

For activists, I asked questions like:

- c) Can you tell me about some of the advocacy on social issues that you have been involved in?
- d) Who engages with you when you speak about social issues?

The second topic explored the experience of the participants during their participation in activism or critical opinion sharing. This topic was aimed at understanding what identity or social context of the participant attracted backlash. For the activists, the questions were focused on their interactions in the context of activism. For everyday individuals, the focus was general beginning with the kind of opinion they shared online and narrowed to their identity online. These included questions like-

- a. Can you tell me what your interactions are like online like what issues do you talk about, and who responds?
- b. When you share opinions on gendered issues how does your audience react?
- c. Do you notice any gendered pattern to these responses for example approval or disapproval from men or women?

The third and fourth topics were designed to have these women narrate their experiences of backlash and their responses. I projected the issue of backlash to the participants using various examples, this is because digital violence has been called many names and was still not very well known by the participants. The questions under these topics included-

Have you ever experienced any form of backlash? *While you interacted online?*

If yes, can you tell me about it?

*Conversational Probes: Where did this happen, was this a one-off experience or does it happen regularly?*

Why do you think you had such an experience? By that I mean your gender, being from a certain tribe, race, or being from a certain class?

- a. How did you respond when faced with backlash?
- b. Why did you choose to respond in that manner?
- c. Did your response make the backlash stop?

The interviews were concluded with questions that focused on examining how the participants' experience of backlash changed them. This was aimed at identifying the digital strategies used by women and how they were exercising their agency when faced with backlash.

### 3.1 From Insider to Outsider: Reflections on Silent Participants

I must note that this research paper is not the first time I have inquired into the issue of harm in digital spaces, the first time was at the Dutch Black Scholars Conference in 2023. Then my view was positivist guided by my training as a Lawyer and the only solution I saw was more regulations. I had not thought whether these regulations would affect free speech, would I be giving a nod for censorship? I approached this as though the harm in these spaces was only a reflection of society as opposed to being embedded in society. With my knowledge of the gendered nature of these spaces my approach has changed and so has my advocacy.

At the point where I used digital purposive sampling, my identity in the research changed from being an “outsider within” to being an insider and a ‘victim’ who was searching for answers to understand what had happened to me. It is important at this point to note that some African women do not publicly wear the badge of a feminist, because they are often labeled as ‘man-haters’. This is largely because of the misrepresentation of feminist principles in these societies. What attracted me to some of the participants I had selected in my third phase of recruitment, was because they described themselves in their bio as- feminist, bitter feminist, and angry feminist. My bio reads ‘technofeminist’ and this was like an invitation to face backlash online. However, I did not envisage that backlash from a woman, nor did I see it as a barrier to my research.

When a prospective participant whose uses silence as a strategy to control who has access to her by limiting her comment section and inbox from public access declined my public invitation to be interviewed, I just assumed she did not want to speak with me. However, when she posted on Facebook stating that the reasons she declined my invitation for an interview, and also blocked me was because my bio reads ‘Technofeminist’, and she would not have anything to do with a feminist. I was shocked because I had assumed that it was only the identity of my participants that mattered and not mine. While I hold on to my identity as a ‘victim of misunderstanding’ in my interactions with her, I do so because I felt misinterpreted without any opportunity to give an explanation. However, in retrospect, it was bold of me to assume that identifying as a feminist to show my commitment to gender equity and justice would automatically grant me access to the lives of others.

I also recognise that I wielded a privileged position as a researcher with the power to engage in this discourse ‘to help women’ who had experienced harm gain visibility through my research. With this mindset, I was blinded to the fact that a closed comment section meant that the individual was exercising control and asserting her autonomy by drawing boundaries and my public request was an intrusion. And in that way, my public invitation even though not leading in my opinion as I did not give details of what we would be speaking about, I still put her in the spotlight and in that way, the visibility my post brought was a ‘double-edged sword’. It is this reflection that helped me re-evaluate my recruitment and choose the snowball method to complement my digital purposive sampling, first to balance the power dynamics and secondly to avoid crossing any boundaries because a decline would be easily communicated. This is because while digital spaces appear to grant public access, there remains an aspect of personal interaction in these spaces which must be navigated with caution.

In the process of this research, I recognise that my identity as an advocate has reared its head often and to help me remain objective, I use my LinkedIn page to share the insights about the harms on digital spaces. In this way I can push for social change in the kind of language that may come off as too strong worded for a research paper but perfect to draw the needed attention to these issues. However, in doing this I am conscious that I do not speak unbehalf of others who ‘need my help’ and that my advocacy is not an excuse to ignore boundaries but a call to listen and respect individual agency.

### 3.2 Whose Lives Are We Examining?

The participants of this study were restricted to persons who identified as female and were drawn from three African Countries (Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya) to fill a gap in existing research. I employed the use of purposive sampling to select the study participants.

According to Harding (1992), “the activities of those at the bottom of social hierarchies can provide the starting point for thoughts because the experience and lives of the marginalised provide significant problems to be explained or set research agendas. Their experiences are often devalued and ignored as a source of objectivity” (p.443). Based on this I recruited women activists responding to backlash visibly. I also choosed activists who were responding with silence in the same way that everyday women were even though they often ignored because of their silence. I also choose these two different groups activists and everyday women because of their different identities which often intersect. It is these intersecting identities that shape their experiences of harm online. This distinction was important because research has shown that these groups react differently (McPherson *et al*, 2001). Furthermore, using these two groups allowed for triangulation in the analysis using the lens of subverted agency. From the sampled population, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 research participants (5 everyday internet users and 11 activists).

S/ N O	PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	Origin of Backlash	Nature of Interactions and Identity	Category
1	Lolo	Female	35	Male	A feminist, entrepreneur, divorced single mother who speaks against Domestic Violence and other social issues that affect women	Activist
2	Soi	Female	25	Female	A businesswoman who only talks about her business	Everyday Individual
3	Lily	TS Female	25	Male	A refugee who has revealed her trans identity online	Everyday Individual
4	Dora	TS Female	27	Male	A refugee who advocates for trans rights	Activist
5	IJ- Jenny	Female	38	Male	A feminist, entrepreneur, and single woman who challenges gendered norms by hosting a space for women to share their experiences and other social issues that affect women.	Activist
6	Tekay	Female	32	Male	A feminist and development worker who speaks against discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ population	Activist
7	Davis	Female	35	Female	A social media influencer, divorced single mother, and teacher who advocates for single mothers and carries out paid advertisements on her page.	Activist
8	Tia	Female PWD	40	Male and Female	A development worker, and single mother who advocates for social issues with a focus on women and children	Activist
9	Day	Female	25	Male	Single feminist advocates for women’s rights and challenges cultural norms that silence women	Activist
10	TeeJay	Female	30	Male	Single feminist advocates for women’s rights	Activist
11	Ria	Female	50	Female	Public servant, low interaction online	Everyday Individual
12	First	Female	35	Male	Single female Politician advocates for women’s political participation	Activist
13	Jiro	Female PWD	40	Male	Development worker	Everyday Individual

Figure 1: List of Participants

### 3.2.1 Analytical Procedures

I used both manual deductive and inductive coding processes. Deductive coding was initially utilised in coding the responses of participants resulting in several pages of quotes. In the interpretation of the quotes, the researcher used a thematic reflexive analysis to methodically codify and categorise quotes from the data. (Williams and Moser, 2019). This helped the researcher to study the interview transcripts to identify common words that were repeated, emotion-laden quotes, and phrases describing personal actions, and these formed the first set of open codes. These codes were matched for their similarity and categorised into the axial codes “leaping from raw data to conceptualisation of the data” (Brinkman, 2013).

In analysis, “not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts” (Einstein cited in *ibid*) hence, I merged the quotes and phrases grouped under a theme using an interpretation system based on the context in which the participants used them. The interpretations provided a framework to categorise them into larger themes, this process was guided by the literature review. The quotes were categorised using selective codes to identify the theories, answer research questions, and provide recommendations.

### 3.2.2 Ethical Consideration and Limitations

Although the participants requested that their real names be used by the researcher, they are referred to in this research using pseudonyms to ensure that ethical concerns are integrated into the research from the conceptualisation to dissemination (Sultana, 2007, p. 375). The use of ‘silence’ by participants that involved closing their comments sections and restricting public access to their profiles prevented me from recruiting more participants. In asking questions that involved experiences of backlash, I could not probe further to avoid re-traumatising the participants and this leaves a gap in exploring the individual psychological effects of these experiences. Furthermore, the use of digital platforms to conduct the audio interviews prevented the researcher from seeing the participants’ body cues to understand their unspoken words.

While speaking to the participants, it became clear that before the interview the participants had not reflected on what had happened to them and how it changed them, and the interviews were the first time they did that. If the researcher had the resources to provide psychological support, there may have been more probing into the effects of the backlash on their mental health, beyond investigating how it affected their interaction online. Notwithstanding, the participants were still likely to be affected in some way because of the feelings that narrating the event(s) evoked, as such they were constantly reminded of their power to withdraw from the interview at any point.

In the next section of this research, I utilise technofeminism as a frame to analyse how digital spaces have become sites of power for the production and reproduction of gender. This analysis is important to make it clear that it is not just the interactions in these spaces that harm women but that they are harmed by the way these spaces decide what is reinforced, valued, and rewarded by local communities thereby emboldening patriarchy. I also use intersectionality to analyse the different ways that African women with multiple identities navigate their interaction in digital spaces when they experience backlash.

## Chapter 4 Nobody is Coming to Save Us

In this chapter, I present the findings from the interviews. I analyse these findings using the theoretical framework of technofeminism and intersectionality to explain how digital spaces expose women to harm and secondly how their identities exacerbate the harm. I also analyse how these identities which exist in a social context produce silence as subverted agency. The following sections examine these responses guided by my research questions.

### 4.2 Findings and Discussion

In this research, I sought to examine how women respond to online backlash when they participate in activism. However, in addressing this overarching goal it is important to first discuss the social conditions that produce the different responses to backlash. From my interactions with these women, their identities exacerbated the backlash they faced.

In the sections below, I use technofeminism theory and intersectionality to explain how the different identities of these African women who are transgender, cis-entrepreneurs, unmarried, divorced, single mothers, and Muslim women create different experiences of backlash when they use digital spaces (technology).

#### 1. Identities, Intersectionality, and the Experience of Backlash

While all the women were targeted online, their identities determined the severity of the backlash they faced. For instance, being a woman was one thing but being a woman who was either not biologically female, unmarried(single), divorced, or a single mother, who was bold enough to engage online in conversations that were part of a growing activism that was challenging social norms made these women vulnerable targets of backlash. This is in line with the findings of Allen (2023); Lorde (1984); Crenshaw, (2013); and EIGE (2022), whose research further reinforces my view that while women were exposed to backlash online, their identities determined the kind of backlash they faced and also exacerbated the harm because it allowed the perpetrator to target vulnerabilities.

For example, when TeeJay a participant says, *'if you are single, they say you are sleeping with a married man'*, she is implying that the backlash is always adapted/customised to the identity of the woman being targeted per time. By customising the backlash, the perpetrators were able to inflict psychological, social, and economic harm on these women. This was particularly effective because these women “do not live single-issue lives”, and so when they interact online, they do this with intersecting identities (Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw (1989)). As such while single women are targeted with backlash aimed at condemning their sexuality or morality, married women face backlash that condemns them for not adhering to traditional expectations of a wife. Divorced women also face harsh backlash that questions their morality and holds them responsible for the breakdown of their marriage. The adaptation of this backlash aligns with Collins *et al.* (2021, p.694) who notes that identities do not exist in a vacuum, but they are situated in a social context that adapts to create unique experiences of backlash.

##### 1a. Experiences of Transgender Women

For transgender women, the backlash was harsher, and these spaces became the mobilising ground for the abuse they faced offline. As Lily narrates, *“People are constantly messaging me online to hurl insults at me, they refer to me as a shame to the male gender”*. Another transwoman, Dora, also

notes that she receives messaging and comments that threaten to rape her into correction. In comparison with the accounts of cis women, there is a clear distinction on what the punishment is for transgressing gender norms. For cis women, the backlash is adapted to attack their morality but transgender women like *Lily* and *Dora*, suffer more harshly by paying what I consider a higher price for transgressing gender norms. It is necessary to note that both *Dora* and *Lily* are refugees who fled their countries of origin because of their gender identity. And so, while technology (digital spaces) helps *Lily* and *Dora* live out their identities, challenge gender norms, and find communities of care and support, it has also brought visibility and harm. These spaces blur boundaries making the lives of these women accessible to a wider audience and in that way, it is easy to infiltrate the communities where they derive support online. In this way, these spaces enable the policing of gender norms and make punishments (backlash) easier to mete out. *Lily* notes:

“when they meet me online everything is okay, even when I tell them I am transgender they don’t believe me ... it is on my page, I make videos dancing and all ...when we meet physically and I talk that is when they begin to ask questions and attack me, so when I walk I try not to talk so people don’t know, if you see me I look just like a woman... after that I stopped meeting people” **KII- Lily, August 25, 2024- 11:00 am.**

“People come to my inbox and say so many things because of my posts where I talk about trans rights, they say they will rape me into correction” **KII- Dora, August 25, 2024- 9:00 am.**

The experiences of *Lily* and *Dora* are linked to what Connel (2005) terms “hegemonic masculinity” which favours dominant forms of masculinity and punishes any deviation. In *Lily’s* case during the initial interaction, she is perceived as a man even when she states that she is a (trans)woman, it becomes problematic because her voice does not ‘sound female’. The backlash *Lily* faces can be understood as a response to ‘threats’ that challenge gender binaries of male and female. For *Dora*, these spaces offer her the platform to challenge established norms around sexuality. By posting about trans rights, she also received heightened visibility that made her a target online. Her posts challenge traditional views of gender and the backlashes are aimed at enforcing compliance with hegemonic masculinity. The backlash that *Lily* and *Dora* face in digital spaces where their sexual identity comes under public scrutiny reflects the dominance of those who embody socially sanctioned forms of masculinity. While *Lily* and *Dora* have relied on technology (digital spaces) to express their sexual identity and find communities of support, the visibility that these spaces provide also heightens their vulnerability to harm, and in that way, it strengthens dominant power structures that perpetuate this harm. In another conversation Lily notes,

“..he was in my inbox for 6-8 months, after my last experience, I took my time to know him, yet when I went to visit him, he was different from the pictures when I questioned him, he asked me to shut up... I only remember, waking up by a riverbank, sore, months later I discover I am HIV-positive. I tried to find him online and he had just vanished” **KII- Lily, August 25, 2024- 11:00 am.**

When probed, Lily narrated that she was afraid to report what had happened to her because as a refugee, her first crime was leaving the camp and the second being transgender. Hence, the Police would arrest her for who she was (a refugee and a trans-woman) but ignore the harm she had suffered, and so she could not report what had happened to her. It is this social position and identity that explains their refusal to report the attacks. As put succinctly by Allen, facing harassment online is not an isolated event, it results in a series of ‘cascading risks’ (2023). While these experiences of backlash on digital spaces might begin online, it transcends to offline spaces. They lead to a series of other effects such as fear, distress, and

physical abuse which makes women constantly negotiate their participation in digital spaces (*ibid*).

For *Lily*, being silent was an act of agency albeit it subverted because while it protected her from experiencing further harm, other trans women remained at risk. Even if she wanted to name and shame this person, her medical status would become public exposing her to more harm. With the anonymity in digital spaces, the man who abused *Lily* was free to take up and drop his identity at will so much so that *Lily* could not find him online. This aligns with the findings of Paulin *et al.* (2021) who notes that the anonymity in digital spaces makes it easy to harass others because they do not have to live with the consequences of being identified. *Lily* like other everyday women I interviewed, chose silence as a self-preservation strategy. Summarily, while *Dora* and *Lily* were able to use digital spaces to challenge gender binaries, they were also exposed to harm, and their identities as refugees limited the redress available to them.

## 1b. Experiences of Cis-Women Entrepreneurs

For years, *Davis*, who lives at the intersection of her identity as a woman, divorcee, entrepreneur, and teacher, had navigated her identity online as an advertiser leveraging her large number of followers. She had always been vocal about women leaving a marriage because of emotional abuse like she did. She uses her page to educate women about co-parenting and navigating family rejection after a divorce. By using her Facebook page to share her life experiences, *Davis* was challenging prevailing patriarchal marriage norms that made women consider divorce shameful. However, with no boundaries on digital spaces, abusers now have the power to extend the backlash beyond their professional lives and target their personal lives. This exacerbates the kind of harm they can cause which is not limited to emotional distress, and fear. A case in point is when *Davis* narrates,

“Because I had uncovered his fraudulent schemes to dupe women, he tried to silence me and called other influencers to cook up lies against me and paid them heavily for it. .... They said things about me and my previous marriage... they even said I was not qualified to teach children and called for my sack.” **KII- Davis, August 29, 2024- 3:00 pm.**

*Davis* experience is also similar to that of *Soi* who shares that “*the comments were not about whether I did a good job, it was other women saying I was proud, and they kept tagging others to come and insult me*” **KII- Soi, September 15, 2024- 2:00 pm.**

By recruiting others to attack these women, the enabling power of these spaces is once again emphasised because, in offline spaces, the person requires power over others, but online they only need to derive that power from anonymity and their social status, which is marked by their number of friends or people who share and support their views (Smith, 2017, p. 36). When probed, *Soi* and *Davis* appear to agree that the anonymity protected the people who attacked them, but also the power that the algorithms gave them- because by tagging their accounts, they could reach a wider audience to vent and discredit and damage their reputation. In essence, while digital spaces can be a tool that empowers customers to demand better services from a service provider, legitimate demands can quickly escalate and blur the lines between professional customer reviews and personal vendetta. In this case, the reference to the character of *Soi* an entrepreneur can be understood as a case of personal vendetta, expressed by using a mob action to pressure and bully her into meeting demands, just like hostage-taking. While this corresponds with the finding of Ganzer (2014) that men’s rights and incel groups exist online that disparage women and spread misinformation about them, in *Davis’s* and *Soi’s* case, the attacks were led by women but coordinated similarly to men’s rights and incels groups.

It is important to note that in *Davis's* case, the women who accepted payment from her abuser in return for using their pages to spread misinformation about her were able to do this by leveraging their influence on these spaces. By this I mean a large number of followers and an engaged audience that they have and the ripple effect of driving 'traffic' (more engagement) to their page, and in this way, they gain even more followers. The fees they received were structured as higher payments for advertisements for the Ponzi scheme which *Davis* had disassociated herself from, having realised it was a fraudulent scheme that targeted women who wanted to diversify their incomes. For the women who spread misinformation about *Davis*, it was beyond the immediate financial gain but also about the long-term benefits for them which had to do with how the algorithms work. By posting such harmful content they would gain more interactions, and with more interaction, their pages will gain more visibility giving them a greater chance at receiving more deals for paid adverts and a higher bargaining power. These go to show that incels, mob backlash is not an effect of technology, but it is the technology itself because it is embedded in the frameworks of these digital spaces. So, when these women choose to spread misinformation to gain more followers, they are leveraging the algorithmic design of these spaces that shapes and amplifies harm by transforming the action of an individual into one that is an automated collective process of harm and misogyny. It is in this web of dynamics that subverted agency rears its head because while these women are driven by the design of these platforms to gain visibility, they do this for their benefit at the expense of other women. Consequently, incels and mob backlash have now become a form of technology that is amplified and rewarded by the algorithmic design of these spaces such as likes, shares, comments, and reposts that make harmful content popular. This makes it difficult to differentiate between when individuals are promoting the harm themselves or when it is the algorithms doing so. To further explain this, *Ijay* says:

“we all know these things ...you will report and nothing will happen Mark<sup>4</sup> will not take it down.....so while we cannot respond without being banned we have devised a way to avoid being detected by the algorithms.. we deliberately misspell words, put symbols in between words... using pidgin English and my native dialect works perfectly they (algorithms) cannot detect that I am abusing someone but the person I am talking to will know”.

**KII- Ijay, August 20, 2024- 10:00 am.**

It becomes clear that the use of deliberate misspelling errors, colloquials-Nigerian pidgin English, and native languages to circumvent content moderation has become a form of technology that these women have developed to protect themselves and have their voices be heard in a space that does not take their reports of harm seriously. This is what I term resistance in everyday practices because these women are just trying to make do with what is available to them, however in doing so, they also become part of the system that reproduces harm.

As such it becomes clear that *Soi* and *Davis's* refusal to engage with the people attacking them was also informed by their knowledge of how the algorithms in these spaces would first exacerbate the backlash they were facing. In addition, it would lead to them being blocked and shadow-banned, which would make their posts invisible and affect their business. As such, while deciding to ignore them, *Soi* and *Davis* were putting their business first, thereby subverting the agency of the collective because while their refusal to engage benefited them, it encouraged the abusers to target other women especially since they are not held accountable.

---

<sup>4</sup> Mark Zuckerberg.

## 1c. Experiences of a Muslim Woman

As noted by Collins *et al.* (2021, p.694), identities are not in a vacuum, they are situated in social contexts. For example, when *Mariam* says: “*I cannot respond, because the next thing they will call me a prostitute and that would be bad for me as a Muslim woman in my society.*” What she is saying is that, the decision to respond to backlash is not one she can take lightly, because she risks being exposed to further harm such as being called a prostitute and this comes with social stigma in her society where the use of ‘derogatory speech’ has consequences for women. In this way, the silence that *Mariam* chose as a response to backlash is situated in a social context where being called a prostitute had ripple effects. This goes without saying that the patriarchal structures that control, and police, women’s morality are reinforced in these spaces. In *Mariam’s* case, her identity as a Muslim was weaponised in silencing her because of the effect that using such derogatory words would have not just on her, but her family too. However, in non-Muslim contexts, *Cleo* says “*the normal name for any woman is ashawo (prostitute)... so it doesn’t even bother me.*” What this means is that the use of derogatory words like prostitute has been normalised in *Cleo’s* social context because it has little to no social stigma and so it would be ineffective in silencing her, but this was not the case with *Mariam*. This comparison is necessary to draw attention to how social contexts and identities are interconnected and always play a role in exacerbating harm or limiting response as well as how these social realities are also found online.

## 2. How Everyday Women and Activists Respond to Backlash

Having discussed in the previous section how the experience of backlash is intertwined with identities that also create the social conditions which influence the response of these women. I will now present the findings and discuss how everyday women and activists respond to backlash. In the following section, I use the word ‘targeted’ as opposed to ‘attracting’ because I do not want to feed the narrative of ‘victim-blaming’, which places the burden of safety on women, instead of holding the perpetrators accountable.

The women I interviewed respond to the online backlash in different ways. However, the circumstances of the backlash they faced, and their reason for responding in a certain way, are where the differences begin to emerge between activists and everyday women using these spaces to interact. The general response to backlash online was shaped by the realisation that digital spaces make it easier for them to be targeted, attacked, and harmed online. These women relied on the tools that these spaces provide — which include deleting comments, muting, blocking, reporting, ignoring, avoiding engagements, and leaving the space entirely.

For everyday women, when faced with backlash, their response is aimed at self-preservation and the desire to prevent further escalation especially because, they fear that retaliating places them at risk of social stigma bringing more harm to their identities, professional reputations, and families. For example, when *Bee* says:

“I join Twitter just to see what is happening and the times that I try to comment there is always someone who takes my comment out of context and abuses me, so I don’t answer and I just stay off to avoid problem.” **KII- Bee, September 30, 2024- 10:00 am.**

What this implies is that her decision to ignore comments and be silent in a space like Twitter (X) is because she is at risk of being exposed to backlash. In that way, *Bee* considers a space like Twitter, one that makes her vulnerable to harm so much so that should rather choose to be silent as a self-preservation strategy, even when it denies her the ability to participate and give her opinion about social issues or interact with others. The backlash that *Bee* experienced online which controls her nature of interactions online and silenced her is a

manifestation of gendered violence that women experience offline. *Bee* like other everyday women has learned to adapt to a space that subjects her to the same harm she experiences offline and chooses self-preservation over the dominant expectation of responding with words. It is the choice of self-preservation that is the subverted act because while it benefits *Bee* by keeping her safe from harm online, those who attack her are emboldened seeing that it has silenced her.

In this research, women who are activists respond with silence and with words by engaging those who attack them online. However, the women who adopted silence used it to claim power in these spaces. As *Day* states “*if I respond they will distract women who are coming to my wall to learn so I block them*”. While *Day*’s response reflects the fear of further backlash, her reason for choosing silence is borne out of the need to safeguard her activism from those who try to detract the women who benefit from the information she shares online. In using silence, *Day* is relying on technology to make a strategic decision, set boundaries, reclaim control of the conversations, and push back against misogyny. While at face value the subverted agentic act of silence employed by these women, in response to the backlash they face online, can make them seem helpless, it is important to note that these women are not being passive, but they are making strategic choices and in that way, they are claiming power in these spaces and responding to a system that exposes them to harm whether they intended to do so or not.

In the same way that women offline are expected to navigate their safety, women who engage in activism respond to the backlash online by responding verbally to the individuals who attack or intimidate them as a way of resisting the attempts to silence them. These engagements were based on the tenets of the ‘jungle justice system’ to hold the perpetrators accountable, however, this was only possible when these women had huge social capital marked by many followers. The resort to this justice system revealed the lack of trust in the ability of these spaces to hold the perpetrators accountable, hence these spaces had become sites for the continued enactment of the violence, that these women face offline and similarly they were responsible for their safety online. While these women’s acts of resistance and agentic acts may not immediately address the violence they face or that of other women, they still contribute to keeping the activism ongoing. Its persistent nature has the potential to dismantle existing social and power structures that support patriarchy. This aligns with Cohen’s argument that by choosing autonomy daily these women are unconsciously paving the way for sustained social change online and offline using subverted agentic acts like silence and forming solidarity (Cohen, 2004, pp.38-39).

Digital spaces also mimic agentic acts by allowing users to decide who can communicate with them. Just like mobile phones allow users to reject a call or block a caller, digital spaces enabled by technology have also granted users the power to decide by using a block button similar to rejecting a caller. Some women, use this power to manage the interactions on their page. This is particularly true for *Day* who states: “*I block them and they don’t have access again... overtime I sanitize my wall.*” By determining who could see or read *Day*’s writings, and who was allowed to give feedback, she was exercising her power.

By blocking profiles, women like *Day* like many of my participants can determine who they interact with and use this as a preventive measure to avoid backlash. This goes to show that silence can be an agentic act, even when it appears to conform to structurally functional ways of understanding how technology can limit women’s ability to hold opinions and contribute to discussions. On the other hand, it mirrors how women are negotiating their power online to challenge entrenched social structures that reinforce gender inequalities (Pei and Chib, 2021, pp.579-586).

### 3. Online Backlash as Normalised Violence

In this research I have relied on the technofeminism theory to explain how digital spaces sites are not just where women experience harm but that these spaces in their structural designs are also perpetuating the harm. In this section, I analyse how online backlash is normalised in the same way that a woman being cat-called on the streets offline is considered the norm. This section also explains how everyday interactions challenge gender norms even when this was not the intention.

During my discussions with the 16 African women whose online interactions I examined in this study, one thing was common they were all sharing personal life experiences that defied gendered expectations, and it was instigating further interactions online. For example, *Davis* shares personal experiences of co-parenting, leaving her marriage because of emotional abuse, and how divorced women can navigate family acceptance. *Davis* often adds this when she shares her experience, “don’t die in that marriage, if I could do it you too can”. For context, in many African societies divorce is a shameful thing not just for the woman but her family too, as such, no woman should be proud of it. By simply sharing her experiences and engaging with others who comment on her posts *Davis* is challenging the stigma and shame associated with divorce even without intending to.

As noted by Somolu (2007), in most African societies, women can be found using digital spaces for activism and they do this by sharing information, connecting with other women, and educating them raising awareness of gendered issues. I found similar acts among the participants who were engaging in mini blogging, research, commenting, and sharing posts that challenged social and gender norms as their form of activism. In using digital spaces to educate, raise awareness, and even provide access to a safe community for other women, these women are often targeted by spreading false information about them. This gendered disinformation is a misogynistic tool that is often used in targeting a woman’s credibility and moral standards to hold certain opinions Herring, *et al.* (2002). This is always aimed at detracting other women from benefitting from the information they share especially because moral values are very important in the African context (*ibid*). As these women note, their ability to hold opinions is weighed on a scale of morality, and the verdicts are described as follows:

“They said my husband threw me out of the house with pregnancy and that I was using the pregnancy to do prostitution this broke me”. **KII- Lolo, August 15, 2024- 10:00 am.**

*Davis* (Divorced single-mother), narrates that for speaking up against a Ponzi scheme, the scheme owner organised women who wrote awful things about her:

“They said I slept with my cousin and that is why my husband divorced me, I was in fear, how do people cook up such lies?” **KII- Davis, August 17, 2024- 2:00 pm.**

Other women recounted their experiences of bullying and doxxing- where the perpetrators released their personal information online to shame and ridicule them. These experiences did not only affect the women involved but their families and their professional lives were often not spared in the backlash, as a participant narrates

“.....he posted about me and my mother saying she died in a hotel room ‘I was broken,... what did my mother have to do with this?’ **KII- Ijay, August 20, 2024- 10:00 am.**

The backlash that these women face especially the spread of misinformation is an example of Butler’s ‘derogatory speech’ which is aimed at ‘deauthorising’ them. Deauthorising, in this case, is to impinge on their moral integrity, and the use of ‘derogatory speech’ was particularly effective in ‘silencing’ these women because in their societies ‘derogatory speech’

had huge impacts. Such as shame and marginalisation not just for these women but their families as well. For example, *Lolo* states:

“when the abuse calling me all sorts of names was becoming too much, my friends and family began to complain so I opened a different Facebook account where I only posted beautiful pictures of myself and did not speak about any social issues.” **KII- Lolo, August 15, 2024- 9:00 am.**

Her decision goes to show how these spaces become extensions of gendered policing and how backlash that impinges on morality impacts not just the individual it is targeted at, but their families and social connections too. The resultant effect is that these women lose their autonomy, and, in that way, their activism is undermined. To also protect their family and social connections these women resort to silence, in this case, *Lolo's* new Facebook account that was silent on social issues.

The content moderation of these spaces allows for ‘derogatory speech’/misinformation to spread. In that way, it helps to suppress the voices of these women, distorting public opinions about them, and reinforcing moral judgment as opposed to spreading accurate information. This form of misinformation perpetuates harmful societal narratives, and reinforces moral judgment. Worse still, even when a post that conveys misinformation is reported, the categories for labelling the harm are restrictive, leaving no room for the women involved to explain the context that perhaps would convey how serious the issue is. For these women, these experiences are like the price they pay for being in these spaces. For instance, *Tekay* narrates,

“..anything you bring to social media is for the public so when you come online take what you see”. **KII- Tekay, August 10, 2024- 10:00 am.**

*Ijay* shares the same view with *Tekay* hence she states “...*I don't think you can be an out-spoken person on any social media platform...without experiencing online violence, I think.. they go hand in hand.*” With this understanding, *Tekay* and *Ijay*, views these spaces like the streets they walk on, where they have men catcalling them and all they can do is walk past these men in silence. In that way, these spaces mimic offline spaces by attempting to define what constitutes harmful behaviour, and the result is that the everyday experience of violence is normalised and considered part of being in these spaces (UNFPA, No Date, pp.2-8).

In digital spaces, women are also expected to conform to the norms that dictate their behaviour, this includes being silent, not questioning, feeling shame, and living up to a certain moral standard, and when they do not do this, they become targets. This aligns with the finding of Oyosoro, *et al.* (2022) that these spaces are not neutral but are shaped by societal norms. By transgressing these norms, these women are subjected to backlash (abuse, threats, and harassment) as punishment for attempting to live above societal standards and negotiate their power by exercising their agency in whatever form (Scott, 1985). It is this transgression, the audacity of a divorced woman to live her life openly online without shame, while standing up for others, that I interpret to mean activism, and this is what led to her being targeted. To claim that the violence these women experience is about men's attacks on women would be to put it simplistically, ignoring the larger systemic issues of patriarchy that ensure the subjugation of women. However, with the advent of technology people now use digital spaces to enforce this system through harassment. The backlash that these women face also reveals that there is no distinction between the patriarchal tendency to exercise power over women offline, and that found in digital spaces. What becomes clear is that these spaces exacerbate these tendencies because they now have a wider reach to spread this misinformation to

stigmatise these women. And by so doing, technology is affecting everyday lives reproducing patriarchy (Wajcman, 2009, p.144).

#### 4. Digital Vigilantism: Claiming Power or Reproducing Violence?

In the previous sections, I have discussed how women respond to backlash and how the backlash they experience has been normalised and considered a price to pay for interacting online. In this section, I use the lens of subverted agency to analyse another form of response where women engage their abusers by resorting to violence. For instance, in the course of my interactions with *Lolo* who takes on her abusers, she narrates:

“Nobody is coming to save us so we have to resort to looking out for ourselves, I don’t take prisoners, I will give you a dressing down and you will never mention my name again, if you call me a prostitute, I will put up a picture of you and your wife and call her a prostitute. Right now, people actually avoid me because of this.” **KII- Lolo, August 15, 2024- 9:00 am.**

While my conversations with *Lolo* are striking, my interactions with at least three participants revealed a pattern of attack against any person who uses “derogatory speech” as a form of backlash to shame women lending their voice to any form of gendered discourse. This is not strange, especially for activism against gender-based violence amid sexual abuse because during the #metoo movements as women named and shamed their abusers online, they faced backlash often impinging their moral standing to shame them (deauthorise), distracting people from the real issue and cast doubt on the authenticity of their experience. In the case of *Lolo*, she resorts to active retaliation in these spaces to resist the violence. She notes that when attacked, she resorts to shaming the individual in terms of “*returning the energy*”. This is like paying the perpetrator back in the same coins. In retaliating, she includes additional information about their private lives, however, other innocent individuals are harmed in a lasting way. *Lolo’s* actions are what Trottier, (2017) terms digital vigilantism which is a process of claiming online visibility to retaliate against a person who offended another person. These can be through collective action that involves coordinated retaliation in digital spaces (*ibid*, p.55-57).

Despite the utilitarian value of vigilantism as an agentic act it is important to state that when women resort to digital vigilantism, they also re-enact the violence meted out to them on other women. By shaming other women, they deflect the blame for the harm they have suffered from the man who is the real culprit by projecting it on the woman. When examining *Lolo’s* actions through the lens of subverted agency, it becomes clear that while vigilantism might be beneficial for her it might not hold the same benefits for the general movements for women's rights. Furthermore, it feeds into anti-feminist discourses and claims of feminazi which demonises feminists and women’s rights activists by associating them with aggression and authoritarianism (Sahin, 2024). To avoid having a simplistic understanding of *Lolo’s* actions it is important to look beyond the words (*ibid*). These acts of vigilantism are not mere arguments involving words, it is an ideological fight that is happening in these spaces (Scott, 1985). It might not be a large-scale on-slaught but it is women engaging in covert and disjointed resistance. By using silence, these women appear to bow to the pressure of societal norms but are covertly resisting by continually spreading gender transformative ideas. In using digital vigilantism these women are masking their defiance of patriarchy with a battle of words, but behind the scenes, they are undermining male dominance. This subverted act benefits the women facing harm because “*now people actually avoid*” them but it casts aspersions on the larger feminist movement, blurring the line between acts of resistance, and harm, further perpetuating the cycle of violence in these spaces. When using the lens of Techno-feminism it becomes clear that the subverted acts in these spaces are connected to the societal

issues of patriarchy and misogyny which informs how people interact. In engaging in vigilantism, these women highlight how these spaces leave them exposed to harm and so they utilise whatever means available to them to push back against these harms. However, by doing this they also become active participants in enforcing the systems of power and violence in these spaces.

## 5. Silence as Subverted Agency, Power, and Resistance

Having discussed the different responses to backlash, I now discuss silence as an agentic act (response) and what it means for the women who use it. First, let me reiterate that when faced with backlash, women respond using different digital strategies not limited to blocking their accounts, restricting comments on their walls, and deleting their accounts *etcetera*. This aligns with the findings of Dunn (2020, p.4); Ging and Park (2023) that women use self-censoring measures when responding to backlash online.

It is important to note that some women used emojis, irony, or ignorance as their response to derogatory comments, and they did this because their identity as ‘public figures and entrepreneurs’ would be affected by engaging with the comments of their abuser in the same derogatory tone. They also considered these to be effective in ‘silencing’ the other person. The non-use of silence in their opinion would make the discussion go on and they would be exposed to further backlash. This explains why *Lolo* says, “*talk is cheap*’ and *Ria* says ‘*just laugh and ignore them, talks are just like clothes, they will come and go, and people will talk about it before you know, within 15 minutes, 3-4 days it is gone again*’. It is this silence, that emboldens these perpetrators to intimidate women; by limiting their interactions in these spaces this is in tandem with the finding of Somolu (2007) that the intimidation aims to dictate which topics women should speak about. This shows how these spaces have become sites of gendered abuse and harassment.

In using these strategies, these women often considered their status, the status of the person who was abusing them, and their education level perceived from what they wrote, and these helped them decide if they wanted to use silence as a response. According to *TeeJay*

“if you allow them to have their way, you are giving them power and allowing them to control your emotions because it is stressful. You are going to be angry. The best thing is just to delete comments. Delete it so they know.” **KII- TeeJay, August 24, 2024- 11:00 am.**

*TeeJay’s* silence was empowering to her but disempowering to the abuser because the abuser could not control her, nor predict her actions. By deleting the comment from her page, she was also exercising her power to silence the person who is abusing her. In deleting the comments *TeeJay* denies the abuser visibility and reestablishes boundaries and this is what I consider an exercise of power over the abuser. However, it was also evident that women like *Teejay* and *Ria* were also performing gender by using a less aggressive approach in the way that they negotiated their interactions in these spaces. I particularly resonate with the responses of these women, because as an African woman, I am taught not to argue with men which is like a self-censoring strategy to prevent harm. Another example that points to this is the reason *Ijay* gave for staying silent despite being bullied, ridiculed, and stalked for six years. She states:

“He would take my posts, my pictures and post them on his wall and his followers would call me names and abuse me, the first time it happened I told my mother, and she said I should ignore it, that is why I was silent for those six years.” **KII- Ijay, August 20, 2024- 10:00 am.**

While the foregoing resonates with the findings of Plan (2020) and UNESCO (2021) a new dynamic also emerges which is that self-censoring for African women did not just emerge from their experience of harm online, but it is also used to protect themselves from harm offline. Furthermore, in practicing self-censoring, silence emerges as a subverted agentic act. For instance, when *Lolo* decided to open a parody Facebook account where she did not engage or contribute to gendered issues she was utilising self-censoring as silence. Her decision was because her family and friends had asked her to do so she would remain safe and avoid the backlash that came from her previous engagements on gendered issues. It is also important to note that while *Lolo's* decision to operate this parody Facebook account was a subverted act, it was not in isolation from other acts of resistance. This is because while *Lolo* appeared to bow to the pressure, she was covertly operating another account where she was still engaging in gendered discussions it easy to blend into the myriad of other Facebook users. To further cover her acts, she blocked every family member and others who could identify her on Facebook.

# Chapter 5 Conclusion

## 5.1 Looking Ahead

In this research paper, I have examined the relevance of digital spaces as platforms that amplify women's voices in their conscious acts of activism or their everyday practices that do not conform to social norms. While these spaces have been useful, they have exposed women to backlash. This backlash does not just happen because the interactions of these women threaten social norms but because these spaces by their structural designs confer anonymity that allows harm to thrive without accountability. In response to these backlashes be it bullying, harassment, doxxing, threats, or abusive and derogatory comments these women have found ways to respond, and for different reasons.

Women are not affected by backlash in the same way because their identities exacerbate them. It is the strategies that these women use in navigating their interactions in spaces where they are now exposed to the backlash that manifests as silence, power, and resistance. The findings of this study reveal that even when women do not consciously engage in activism they are targeted because their everyday lives and opinions threaten social norms and so the backlash directed at them is aimed at silencing them. The digital strategies used by these women include blocking, deleting comments, restricting their profiles from public access, and leaving a digital space entirely. In using these strategies, these women as everyday individuals reclaim silence as a self-preservation strategy while women as activists use it as a form of resistance to safeguard their activism. The activism whether intentional or not grows into social movements that are not just focused on achieving equal rights for women but are aimed at confronting the societal and systemic structures that oppress them.

Over time, women engaged in activism have developed 'thick skin' and learned ways to respond to or shield themselves from the social and cultural norms that censor their speech, and police their behaviour online and offline. These women have also adapted to the ways that digital spaces expose them to harm- as such while their use of silence may be perceived as helplessness it is an exercise of agency even though subverted. As women 'pick their battles' and choose silence they are faced with the dilemma of deciding which cause is worth lending their voice to, at the risk of backlash. While these agentic acts are useful, they threaten activism and social movements in general as more women are likely to choose their safety over the risk that comes with activism. As these spaces continue to protect perpetrators granting them anonymity it amplifies and normalises the abuse of women thereby feeding into the continuum of violence that already exists offline.

The western narrative that restricts activism to intentional organised movements is one that I challenge in this research because it invisibilises everyday lives as forms of activism in digital spaces. From my interactions with the 16 women in my study, it was their boldness to live authentically in defiance of gendered norms by sharing their life experiences or acting outside of the boundaries their society permits that exposed them to backlash. Through my research, I have gone beyond the binaries of mainstream feminism that divide those who are vocal and those who choose silence (Parpart and Parashar, 2019, p.2). By focusing on African women who practice silence when using digital spaces, I have attempted to reshape what is worth investigating, to encourage the examination of silence as agency and the social conditions of the women who choose silence (Somulu, 2007 cited in Chib and Pei, 2021). In this research, I make it clear that it is important to pay attention when a person stops talking (Glenn, 2004, p.15-16).

While silence is often overlooked and considered passive, in this research I have been deliberate about drawing attention to silence as a form of agency, power, and ‘resistance’ in digital spaces where activism is often measured by visibility and engagement. I have also provided examples of some instances, where those who seek to silence women use “derogatory speech” as a form of backlash that impinges on the moral standards of these women. From these examples, such speech is aimed at detracting from the real issues by making threats to inflict fear on these women (Butler, 1997, p.2; Herring *et al.*, 2002). However, while this backlash seeks to silence, it also instigates responses that would attract further backlash. This response is often expected to be verbal, but in this research, the women respond with silence in different ways and for different reasons. And so, when women adopt silence as a self-preservation method to protect themselves as they navigate their interactions online, their use of silence is not to succumb to social norms. I interpret it as their way of challenging (intended or not) the dominant view that would expect them to try to defend themselves by exercising their agency, even though it is “motivated by an effort to reverse the threat” of backlash (Butler, 1997, pp. 2,87).

I must also note that what I consider resistance- the challenge of social norms is not a deliberate attempt from the outset to challenge power dynamics (Cohen, 2004, pp.38-39). Resistance for me is the everyday lives of African women who despite patriarchal norms, live their lives in a way that challenges these norms, even without being conscious of it. And so, when African women continue to interact in digital spaces using different strategies to protect themselves from backlash, they are claiming power for themselves.

## 5.2 Suggestion for further studies

This research explored how backlash affects women’s participation in activism. However, my conversations with these women revealed that they also suffered psychologically from the backlash, but this was beyond the scope of this research paper. Future studies can further explore the psychological impacts of backlash.

In this research, the responses from the women revealed that digital spaces were not just sites where they were exposed to harm but that these spaces were structurally perpetuating harm using algorithms and content moderation tools. As such, digital vigilantism emerged as a strategy being used by these women because they considered the algorithms and content moderation tools that do not act on their complaints biased. However, examining these algorithms and content moderation tools was also beyond the scope of this paper. Further studies can use digital ethnography as a methodology to examine how digital colonisation informs Western-centric and gender-blind content moderation tools that ignore context-specific abuse leaving African women exposed to harm online that are not considered threats in a Western context. Further studies may also examine how racial disparities in the context of digital colonisation, play a role in the success or failure of digital social movements in African countries.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adebiyi, K., 2020. 'Mitigating the impact of media reporting of terrorism – case study of the #bringbackourgirls campaign' *Strategic Communications Project Report*, 29<sup>th</sup> October. Available at: <https://www.icct.nl/publication/mitigating-impact-media-reporting-terrorism-case-study-bringbackourgirls-campaign> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Atela, M.; Ojebode, A., No Date. 'New forms of social and political action: a study of #BringBackOurGirls' Available at: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/new-forms-of-social-and-political-action-a-study-of-bringbackourgirls/> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Abou-Habib, L., Akil, C., and Chidiac, C., 2023. A flurry of feminist knowledge production in the SWANA region and the emergence of a robust young intersectional movement. *Gender and Development*, 31(2-3), 479-494.

Adeola, A., 2018 'Awani: A colonial history of women,' Available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjyfBOxR9Xw&ab\\_channel=Awanifilm](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjyfBOxR9Xw&ab_channel=Awanifilm) (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Agbashi, E.' Tesfayohannes, N.; Adeyemi, T.; and Aghayere, O 2021 #EndSARS 2020: The social movement that rebirth activism in Nigeria May 15, *Op-Ed Yale Journal of International Affairs* <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/endsars-2020-the-social-movement-that-rebirth-activism-in-nigeria> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Agur, C., and Frisch, N. 2019. Digital disobedience and the limits of persuasion: social media activism in hong kong's 2014 umbrella movement. *Social Media + Society*, 5(1), pp.1-12.

Ajaja, S., 2023. 'Feminist digital citizenship in Nigeria' in Roberts, T. and Bosch, T., (eds.) *Digital Citizenship in Africa: Technologies of Agency and Repression* New York: Zed Books 2023 pp.117-147.

Akpan, E. O., (a) 2024, 'Nudes are forever': exploring the social responses to revenge porn in Nigeria' *A Qualitative Interviewing (3207) paper Research analysis summative assignment submitted to Institute of Social Studies*, p.1-3.

Akpan, E. O (b) 2024, 'Positionality statement on contested digital spaces as sites for activism: a case study of the #endsars movement by the feminist coalition (FemCO)' A SJP working towards the RP (4393) *paper Submitted at the International Institute for Social Studies*.

Akpan, E. O (c) 2024. Perceptions of digital violence against women in Nigeria a qualitative interviewing (3207) *paper submitted to Institute of Social Studies*, p.1-6.

Akpan, E. O and Lakshmi, S. 2024, 'Mobilising against patriarchy and caste, on Twitter: how women in India and Nigeria use digital spaces to speak up against gender-based violence' A gender and sexuality as 'lenses' to engage with development policy and practice assignment (4338) *paper submitted to Institute of Social Studies*, p.1-3.

Allen, A., 2022. 'An intersectional lens on online gender based violence and the Digital Services Act'; *Verfassungs Blog*, 1<sup>st</sup> November. Available at: <https://verfassungsblog.de/dsa-intersectional/> (Accessed 1/9/2024).

Alichié, B. O., 2022. Communication at the margins: Online homophobia from the perspectives of LGBTQ + social media users. *Journal of Human Rights*, 3(22), pp.269-283.

Antonio, F. and Roberts, T., 2023. "Internet shutdowns and digital citizenship" in Roberts, T. and Bosch, T., (eds.) *Digital Citizenship in Africa: technologies of agency and repression*, New York: Zed Books 2023 pp.85-115.

Arevalo, N., 2024. 'Session 6 gender, sexuality, and technology' *Lecture Delivered at the International Institute of Social Studies June*.

Awojulgbe, O., 2020. CBN gets court order to freeze accounts of #EndSARS 'promoters'. *The Cable*, 6<sup>th</sup> November  
Available at: <https://www.thecable.ng/breaking-cbn-gets-court-order-to-freeze-accounts-of-endsars-promoters> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Azelmat, M., 2024. cited in Benslimane, Y.; Haddoumi, C.; Marvata, J.; and Nakib, A; Challenges at the intersection of online gender-based violence and intersectional youth movements for democracy in the SWANA region Available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Challenges-at-the-Intersection-of-Online-Gender-Based-Violence-and-Intersectional-Youth-Movements-for-Democracy-in-the-SWANA-Region-share-file-1-1-1.pdf> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Babbie, E. R., 2020. *The Practice of Social Research*. Cengage AU.

Backe, E.L., Lilleston, P., and McCleary-Sills, J., 2018. Networked individuals, gendered violence: A literature review of cyberviolence. *Violence and gender*, 5(3), pp.135-146.

Banks, A., 2011. *Digital griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Southern Illinois : SIUP.

BBC, 2019. 'Hong Kong protests: What is the 'umbrella movement?'' Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49862757> (Accessed 15 October 2024).

BellaNaija, 2020. 'Instagram apologises for incorrectly flagging #ENDSARS contents and marking posts as false.' 22<sup>nd</sup> October. Available at: <https://www.bellanaija.com/2020/10/instagram-flagging-endsars-post/> (Accessed 15 October 2024).

Bennett, W., 2003. Communicating global activism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 6(2), pp.143-168.

Bockarie, N., 2024. Social media as the new frontier for anti-gender work. *African Feminism*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April. Available at: <https://africanfeminism.com/social-media-as-the-new-frontier-for-anti-gender-work/> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Brinkmann, S., 2013. Writing up the research findings. In *Qualitative interviewing. Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press pp.111-138.

Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024. 'Protests in Kenya: Alleged breach of privacy to aid surveillance, denial of access to information and consumer boycott; includes Safaricom's comments' 27<sup>th</sup> June Available at: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/kenya-govt-urged-to-restore-internet-during-protests-as-concerns-about-surveillance-aided-by-telecoms/> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Butler, J., 1990. *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge.

Butler, J., 1997. *Excitable speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.

Castro, P. L. and Meira, M., 2024. 'Digital violence and gender inequality: a vicious cycle' Available at: <https://www.derechosdigitales.org/23444/digital-violence-and-gender-inequality-a-vicious-cycle/> (Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2024).

Castillo-Esparcia, A., Caro-Castaño, L., and Almansa-Martínez, A., 2023. Evolution of digital activism on social media: opportunities and challenges. *Profesional de la información*, 32(3), pp.1-16.

Collins, P.H., da Silva, E.C.G., Ergun, E., Furseth, I., Bond, K.D. and Martínez-Palacios, J., 2021. Intersectionality as critical social theory: Intersectionality as critical social theory, Patricia Hill Collins, Duke University Press, 2019. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20(3), p.690.

Connell, R.W., and Messerschmidt, J.W., 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & society*, 19(6), pp.829-859.

Cohen, C.J., 2004. Deviance as resistance: A new research agenda for the study of black politics. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 1(1), pp.27-45.

Chib, A., 2024. Designing a questionnaire (Lecture). International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands presented on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2024.

Chib, A., and Chen, V. H. H., 2011. Midwives with mobiles: A dialectical perspective on gender arising from technology introduction in rural Indonesia. *New Media & Society*, 13(3), 486-501.

Chib, A.; Ang, M W.; Zheng, Y.; Nguyen, S H. 2022 Subverted agency: The dilemmas of disempowerment in digital practices *New media & society* 24(2) 458–477.

Chib, A., 2024. Ethics and Consent Form EUR in Qualitative Interviewing: 3207 Available at: [https://canvas.eur.nl/files/93072748/download?download\\_frd=1](https://canvas.eur.nl/files/93072748/download?download_frd=1) (Accessed 10 March 2024).

Chopra, D., 2021. 'The resistance strikes back: women's protest strategies against backlash in India', *Gender & Development*, 29(2–3), pp. 467–491.

Crelinsten, R., 2022. 'Online Gender-Based Violence Is Endemic: It Should Be Considered a Form of Terrorism' <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/online-gender-based-violence-is-endemic-it-should-be-considered-a-form-of-terrorism/> accessed 20/4/2024.

Crenshaw, K.W., 2013. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.

Crenshaw, K., 2013. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.

Dodge, A., 2016. Digitizing rape culture: Online sexual violence and the power of the digital photograph. *Crime, media, culture*, 12(1), 65-82.

Dione, N 2024. Senegal cuts internet again amid widening crackdown on dissent Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ahead-planned-march-over-vote-delay-senegal-suspends-internet-access-> (Accessed 13 February 2024).

Duggan, M., 2017. 'Men, women experience and view online harassment differently', *Pew Research Center*, July 14, Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/07/14/men-women-experience-and-view-online-harassment-differently/> (Accessed 1 February 2024).

Dunn, S. 2020. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview. *Centre for International Governance Innovation: Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 1*. pp.1-38.

Dixon, S. J., 2024. 'Gendered abuse online - statistics and facts' Available at: <https://www.statista.com/topics/9384/gendered-abuse-online/#topicOverview> (Accessed 1 February 2024).

Edwards, R., and Holland, J., 2013. What sort of research tools can be used in conducting qualitative interviews. *What is qualitative interviewing*, 1, pp.53-64.

Ekoh, P.C., and George, E.O., 2021. The role of digital technology in the EndSars protest in Nigeria during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of human rights and social work*, 6(2), pp.161-162.

Elassal, A and Abasli, I, 2023. "Why are you not doing research in your home country?" – The complexities of being from and doing research in the Global South, The complexities of being from and doing research in the Global South," Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2023/12/05/why-are-you-not-doing-research-in-your-home-country-the-complexities-of-being-from-and-doing-research-in-the-global-south/> (Accessed 1 February 2024).

European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)., 2022. 'Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls' Available at: [https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/combating\\_cyber\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_and\\_girls.pdf](https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/combating_cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls.pdf) (Accessed 20 June 2024).

Enyinnaya, J.C., and Arthur, T.O., 2024. African technocultural feminist theory (ATFT), *Feminist Media Studies*, 24(4), pp. 851–868.

- Faith, B., 2022. Tackling online gender-based violence; understanding gender, development, and the power relations of digital spaces. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 26(3), pp.325-340.
- Faniyi, O., 2024. Unpredictable digital intimacies and virtual backstabbing: the feminist coalition's political effect in Nigeria. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 17(2), pp.137-145.
- Foucault, M., 1982. The Subject and Power in *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), pp.777-795.
- Ganzer, M., 2014. In bed with the trolls. *Feminist media studies*, 14(6), pp.1098-1100.
- Ging, D. and Park, K. 2023. 'Social media: the harms to women and girls'. Available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/social-media-the-harms-to-women-and-girls> (Accessed 14 June 2024).
- Glenn, C., 2004. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Gunner, L., 2019. Political song in Africa. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-901>. (Accessed 14 October 2024).
- Haraway, D. J., 1997. *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan©\_Meets\_Oncomouse*. New York: Routledge, p.23-45.
- Haraway, D. J., 1985. A manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review*, 80, pp. 83-100.
- Haraway, D. J., 1989. *Primate visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge.
- Harding, S., 1992. Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity?". *The Centennial Review*, 36(3), pp.437-470.
- Haas, A. M., 2018. 'Toward a digital cultural rhetoric' in Alexander, J. and Rhodes, J. (eds.) (2018) *The Routledge handbook of digital writing and rhetoric*. New York, NY: Routledge. p.412-421.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., and Bailey, A. 2020. *Qualitative research methods*. Sage.
- Herring, S., Job-Sluder, K., Scheckler, R. and Barab, S., 2002. Searching for safety online: Managing "trolling" in a feminist forum. *The information society*, 18(5), pp.371-384.
- Holmes, A. G. D., 2020. Researcher Positionality--A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research--a new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8(4), pp. 1-10.

Hume, T., and Park, M., 2014. 'Understanding the symbols of Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution' *CNN*, 30<sup>th</sup> September. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/30/world/asia/objects-hong-kong-protest/index.html> (Accessed 15 July 2024).

Stanford University, (No Date). *Say their names*. Available at: <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/saytheirnames> (Accessed: 12 November 2024).

Hicks, J., 2021. 'Global evidence on the prevalence and impact of online gender-based violence (OGBV)'. *K4D Report*. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/16983> (Accessed 1 June 2024).

Jones, T., 2023. 'Any victim is a liar': sexual violence scandals in Italy expose deep-seated sexism' *The Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/16/any-victim-is-a-liar-sexual-violence-scandals-in-italy-expose-deep-seated-sexism?ref=hir.harvard.edu> (Accessed 21 April 2024).

Kundu, K., 2024. 'The #MeToo Movement: investigating the lasting international impacts' *Harvard International Review*, 31<sup>st</sup> January. Available at: <https://hir.harvard.edu/metoo-movement-international/> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Kuo, L., 2019. 'Hong Kong 'umbrella movement': nine convicted over protests' *The Guardian* 9<sup>th</sup> April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/09/hong-kong-umbrella-movement-protesters-guilty-over-pro-democracy-rallies-jail> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Kilarigbo, 2023. 'Lekki shooting: 15 people died, dj switch breakdown' 23<sup>rd</sup> October Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuXDbOn7bxE> (Accessed 10 September 2024).

Lindgren, S., 2017. *Digital media and society*, United Kingdom: Sage Publications Ltd.

Livingston, E., 2016. 'Don't condemn online protest. Activism needs all the help it can get'. *The Guardian*, 29<sup>th</sup> February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2016/feb/29/charities-social-media-slactivism-campaigns> (Accessed 1 September 2024).

Lorde, A.G., 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. United States of America: Crossing Press.

Lovejoy, K. and Antaran, R. E. 2014. 'Yellow Umbrella Protests' Available at: <https://www.tactics4change.org/case-studies/yellow-umbrella-protests/> (Accessed 10 August 2024).

Mahmood, S., 2008. Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(2), pp. 202-236.

Malefakis, M., 2022. The #ArewaMeToo movement in Northern Nigeria: A collusion of Islam, culture and modernity. In Sounaye, A., and Chappatte, A., (eds.) *Islam and Muslim Life in West Africa Practices, Trajectories and Influences*, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 63-82.

Marino, K M., No Date. 'The international history of the US suffrage movement' Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-internationalist-history-of-the-us-suffrage-movement.htm> (Accessed 1 October 2024).

Martin, D. G., Hanson, S., and Fontaine, D. (2007). What counts as activism?: The role of individuals in creating change. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 35(3/4), pp.78–94.

Munga, J., 2024. 'Kenya is at an inflection point. it needs a new path to progress'. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/08/kenya-genz-protests-progress-tech-corruption?lang=en> (Accessed 1 September 2024).

Mütterlein, J. and Fuchs, C., 2019. Digital Technologies and Their Influence on Spaces. In *PACIS* Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337818199\\_Digital\\_Technologies\\_and\\_their\\_Influence\\_on\\_Spaces](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337818199_Digital_Technologies_and_their_Influence_on_Spaces) (Accessed 5 April 2024).

Mwaura, J., 2017. Digital activism in the social media era: Critical reflections on emerging trends in sub-saharan Africa. *African Journalism Studies*, 38(1), pp.152-155.

Nuhu, S H., 2020. 'What happens when we protest: #MeToo in northern Nigeria'. Available at: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/arewametoo-what-happens-when-we-protest-against-sexual-violence/> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Nyabola, N., 2024. African Feminisms as Method: A Methodology for African Feminisms in the Digital Age. *Feminist Africa*, 5(2), pp.94-112.

Ogala, O., 2020. 'The #EndSARS movement draws parallel to Black Lives Matter' <https://andscape.com/features/the-endsars-movement-draws-parallel-to-black-lives-matter> (Accessed 12 May 2024).

Olafusi, E., 2021. 'Rinu Oduala, Aisha Yesufu, FemCo... the women who powered #EndSARS movement'. *The Cable*, 20<sup>th</sup> October. Available at: <https://www.thecable.ng/rinu-oduola-aisha-yesufu-femco-the-women-who-powered-endsars-movement/> (Accessed 1/5/2024).

Olingo, A., 2024. 'East Africa's finance bills deal heavy blow to women's wallets'. *Nation*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Available at: <https://fullerproject.org/story/east-africas-finance-bills-deal-heavy-blow-to-womens-wallets/> (Accessed 1/9/2024).

Olowoporoku, M., 2021. '#EndSARS: outrage over feminist coalition audited report' *PM News*, 8<sup>th</sup> May. Available at: <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2021/05/08/endsars-outrage-over-feminist-coalition-audited-report/> (Accessed 10/5/2024).

'Online civic space increasingly restricted in Senegal'. 2023. *Africtivistes*, 9<sup>th</sup> November. Available at: <https://www.africtivistes.com/en/online-civic-space-increasingly-restricted-in-senegal/> (Accessed 14 September 2024).

Okonofua, O., 2021. 'I never got asylum in Canada' - DJ Switch clears air about whereabouts', *Pulse Nigeria*, 26<sup>th</sup> September. Available at: <https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/dj-switch-clears-air-about-whereabouts-she-never-got-asylum-in-canada/7z1ggpb> (Accessed 20 September 2024).

Oyosoro, F.I., Okafor, C.I. and Aigbe, R., 2022. The# EndSARS protest and black cyber-feminism: A study of the feminist coalition and the rise of cyber-feminist ideologies in Nigeria. *Gender, technology and development*, 26(3), pp.485-502.

Parkinson, J., 2021. 'How Twitter activism turned the fight against Boko Haram upside down', *Washington Post*, 16<sup>th</sup> April. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/slackivism-chibok-twitter-our-girls/2021/04/16/0e3b9fee-9e1f-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/slackivism-chibok-twitter-our-girls/2021/04/16/0e3b9fee-9e1f-11eb-8005-bffc3a39f6d3_story.html) (Accessed 16 September 2024).

Parpart, J.L., and Parashar, S., (eds.). 2019. *Rethinking silence, voice and agency in contested gendered terrains*. London: Routledge.

Paulin, M., and Boon, S. D. (2021). Revenge via social media and relationship contexts: Prevalence and measurement. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(12), pp.3692-3712.

Pei, X., and Chib, A., 2021. Beyond the gender (dis) empowerment dichotomy: The mobile phone as social catalyst for gender transformation in the Global South. *New Media & Society*, 23(3), pp.578-595.

Plan International Canada., 2023. 'Girl activists fear for safety, making gains at huge personal cost – says new Plan International report', *Plan Media Release*, 4<sup>th</sup> October. Available at: <https://plancanada.ca/en-ca/about-us/media-centre/women-witness-backlash-against-female-activists> (Accessed 16 May 2024).

Porta, D., and Mosca, L., 2005. Global-net for global movements? A network of networks for a movement of movements. *Journal of public policy*, 25(1), pp.165-190.

Rights and Security International., 2024. 'Statement on unlawful detention of activists in Kenya'. Available at: <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/impact/entry/statement-on-unlawful-detention-of-activists-in-kenya> (Accessed 20 September).

Rubin, H. J., and Rubin, I. S., 2011. *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Sage.

Sahin, B., 2024. Email communication, to E. Akpan, 1 March, 2024.

Scott, J.C., 1985. *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Sen, A., 1982. Rights and agency. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, pp.3-39.

Serbin, S. and Rasoanaivo-Randriamamonjy, R. 2015. *African Women, Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Shao, G. 2019., 'Social media has become a battleground in Hong Kong's protests' <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/16/social-media-has-become-a-battleground-in-hong-kongs-protests.html> (Accessed 20 June 2024).

Sheikh, M. R., and Rogers, M.M., 2024. Technology-facilitated sexual violence and abuse in low and middle-income countries: a scoping review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(2), pp.1614-1629.

Sheldon, K., 2017. *African women: Early history to the 21st century*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Smith, T., 2017. *Politicizing digital space: Theory, the Internet, and renewing democracy*. London: University of Westminster Press.

Sultana, F., 2007. Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 6(3), pp.374-385.

Somolu, O., 2007. 'Telling our own stories': African women blogging for social change. *Gender & Development*, 15(3), pp.477-489.

Sorce, G., and Dumitrica, D., 2022. Transnational dimensions in digital activism and protest. *Review of communication*, 22(3), pp.157-174.

Theocharis, Y., Lowe, W., Van Deth, J.W., and García-Albacete, G., 2015. Using Twitter to mobilize protest action: Online mobilization patterns and action repertoires in the Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, and Aganaktismenoi movements. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(2), pp.202-220.

The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021. 'Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women' Available at: <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/> (Accessed 21 August 2024).

The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse., 2023. 'Technology facilitated gender-based violence: Preliminary landscape analysis'. Available at: <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/202307/Global%20Partnership%20TFGBV%20Preliminary%20Landscape%20Analysis.pdf> (Accessed 20 August 2024).

The Native., 2020. 'Feminist Coalition's website is now inaccessible within Nigeria The Nigerian government is clamping down further on End SARS protesters' 27<sup>th</sup> November Available at: <https://thenativemag.com/feminist-coalition-website-now-inaccessible-within-nigeria/> (Accessed 1 June 2024).

Trottier, D., 2017. Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility. *Philosophy and Technology*. 30(1), pp.55-72.

UNFPA., No Date. Preventing technology facilitated gender-based violence (TF GBV) Available at: [https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/GDC-Submission\\_UNFPA.pdf](https://www.un.org/techenvoy/sites/www.un.org.techenvoy/files/GDC-Submission_UNFPA.pdf) (Accessed 1 June 2024).

UNICEF, No Date. *Social behaviour change* Available at: <https://www.sbcguidance.org/understand/social-movements> (Accessed 1 May 2024).

Valenzuela, S., Arriagada, A., and Scherman, A., 2012. 'The social media basis of youth protest behavior: The case of Chile,' *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), pp.299-314.

Vlahakis, M., 2018. *Breaking the silence Policy briefing*. Available at: <https://www.woman-kind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/breaking-the-silence-policy-briefing.pdf> (Accessed: 1 September 2024).

Willingham, A J., 2018. 'Slacktivism is over. The #NeverAgain movement is about what's next'. *CNN*, 25<sup>th</sup> March. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/25/us/march-for-our-lives-slacktivism-trnd/index.html> (Accessed: 1 September 2024).

Wajcman, J., 2009. 'Feminist theories of technology'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34(1), pp.143-152.

Wajcman, J., 2004. *TechnoFeminism* Polity Press, Malden, USA.

Williams, M., and Moser, T., (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International management review*, 15(1), pp.45-55.

## List of Appendices

### Appendix 1: Sample Signed Information and Consent Form

#### Information and consent form

**Title: DIGITAL SPACES AS CONTESTED SITES FOR ACTIVISM**

You are invited to participate in an interview as part of project conducted by *Emaediong Akpan* from Erasmus University Rotterdam. During the interview the following personal data will be collected from you: your work, personal opinion about the experience of female social activists on digital spaces like X (twitter) and Facebook.

At Erasmus University, we conduct scientific research. We do this to learn, help people, and contribute to society. Since we are an academic institution conducting scientific research, we process your personal data exclusively for research on the basis of public interest.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. All information will be kept anonymous and confidential. There will be no reference made in oral or written reports which could link you to this study. You do not need to tell us your real names or the names of other people other than your own signature on the Informed Consent Form. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear.

This interview aims to understand your perception of the various forms of violence against women. This interview will be conducted *via zoom, teams*. You will be asked to share your experience and perspective about your participation or observation of gendered social movements.

Though no discomfort is anticipated while participating in this study, you can withdraw your participation at any time during the process without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are not expected to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. Further, we anticipate that the research process will be beneficial to reflect on your digital media use and its potential impact on mobilities.

It will be helpful to take audio-record of the interview and obtain digital screenshots without personal details for analysis. But if you feel uncomfortable about taking record or pictures, we will shut the equipment and take notes by hand instead.

We will store all your data securely and confidentially, accessible only to researchers involved in the project. Any identifiable personal data will be deleted. All data will be stored for 10 years before they are disposed of safely and securely.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an internal review committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This committee ensures that research participants are protected. You can call us at *insert phone number* or send us an email at *insert email* to request a copy of the results of this study or any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data. Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the Data Protection Officer ([fg@eur.nl](mailto:fg@eur.nl)) or visit [www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl](http://www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl). (T: 088 - 1805250).

## Declaration of Consent

I have read the information letter. I understand what the study is about and what data will be collected from me. I was able to ask questions as well. My questions were adequately answered. I know that I am allowed to stop at any time. By signing this form, I

1. consent to participate in this research.
2. consent to the use of my personal data;
3. confirm that I am at least 18 years old<sup>5</sup>.
4. understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary and that I can stop at any time; and
5. understand that my data will be pseudonymous for publication, education and further research.

**Check the boxes below if you consent to this.**

### Data

I consent to the researcher's collection, use and retention of the following data:

 Y

### Audio recording

I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

 Y

### Screenshot recording

I consent to screenshots being taken without personal details.

 Y

I consent to the sharing of my data with Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

### Use for educational purposes and further research

I hereby consent to having my personal data under a pseudonym stored and used for educational purposes and for future research, also in other areas of research than this research.

 Y

**Name of the participant:**

**Name of the researcher: Emaediong Akpan**

**Signature:**



**Signature:** 

**Date:**

28/08/2024

**Date: 20/7/2024**

---

<sup>5</sup> GDPR permits 16 years old in the EEA to consent. From an ethics perspective, holding on to the age people become an adult may be preferable. Different countries may handle a different age for becoming an adult.

## Information and consent form

### Title: DIGITAL SPACES AS CONTESTED SITES FOR ACTIVISM

You are invited to participate in an interview as part of project conducted by *Emaediong Akpan* from Erasmus University Rotterdam. During the interview the following personal data will be collected from you: your work, personal opinion about the experience of female social activists on digital spaces like X (twitter) and Facebook.

At Erasmus University, we conduct scientific research. We do this to learn, help people, and contribute to society. Since we are an academic institution conducting scientific research, we process your personal data exclusively for research on the basis of public interest.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. All information will be kept anonymous and confidential. There will be no reference made in oral or written reports which could link you to this study. You do not need to tell us your real names or the names of other people other than your own signature on the Informed Consent Form. If you have any questions, please ask me. While reading, you can mark parts of the text that are unclear.

This interview aims to understand your perception of the various forms of violence against women. This interview will be conducted *via zoom, teams*. You will be asked to share your experience and perspective about your participation or observation of gendered social movements.

Though no discomfort is anticipated while participating in this study, you can withdraw your participation at any time during the process without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are not expected to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. Further, we anticipate that the research process will be beneficial to reflect on your digital media use and its potential impact on mobilities.

It will be helpful to take audio-record of the interview and obtain digital screenshots without personal details for analysis. But if you feel uncomfortable about taking record or pictures, we will shut the equipment and take notes by hand instead.

We will store all your data securely and confidentially, accessible only to researchers involved in the project. Any identifiable personal data will be deleted. All data will be stored for 10 years before they are disposed of safely and securely.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an internal review committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. This committee ensures that research participants are protected. You can call us at *insert phone number* or send us an email at *insert email* to request a copy of the results of this study or any questions about the study or your privacy rights, such as accessing, changing, deleting, or updating your data. Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email the Data Protection Officer ([fg@eur.nl](mailto:fg@eur.nl)) or visit [www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl](http://www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl). (T: 088 - 1805250).

## Appendix 2: Sample Interview Guides

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS- WOMEN

#### TOPIC ONE: Introduction-Background and Knowledge of the Social Problem

- Can you tell me about yourself?

*Conversational Probes: How did you become an activist? Can you walk me through your journey?*

- Can you tell me about some of the advocacy on social issues that you have been involved in?

*Conversational Probes: Ask participants to expatiate on when, where, who, and how*

*If they don't mention the gendered nature, probe for this.*

- Is there a particular reason you choose to advocate for these issues and not others?

#### TOPIC TWO: EXPERIENCE DURING PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVISM

- Can you tell me about your experience in the activism on the issues of gender justice that you have participated in?
- Where did this take place, was it online or offline or was it both?
- What was your role? I mean what actions did you take that led to believing that you played a role?
- What would you say was the public response to that?
- Did you notice any gendered pattern to these responses for example approval or disapproval from men or women?

#### TOPIC THREE: EXPERIENCE OF BACKLASH

##### **PROJECTION- TO CONVEY THE ISSUE OF BACKLASH**

*(Sometimes while speaking up against an issue online or offline, you can get comments that are rude, people send you awful messages, and you might even have friends and family tell you to keep quiet. In other instances, you can have people respond to your post or your comments with rude remarks that refer to your religion, tribe, race etc.)*

- Have you ever experienced any of these? *during the time you participated in any form of activism?*
- If yes, can you tell me about it?  
*Conversational Probes: Where did it happen, was this a one-off experience or does it happen regularly?*
- Have you ever been removed from a group, ignored, or silenced because of your participation in a social movement like sharing materials, or speaking about a social issue?
- Why do you think you had such an experience? By that I mean your gender, being from a certain tribe, race, or being from a certain class.

#### TOPIC FOUR: RESPONSE: DIGITAL STRATEGIES USED AND WHY

*PROJECTION (Often people block others from their comments section, leave the groups, use an anonymous account, confront others, especially in a closed group like WhatsApp or Facebook, delete comments, delete posts when faced with these)*

- Did you resort to any of these in responding to the backlash(es)?
- Why did you choose to respond in that manner?
- Did your response make the backlash stop?
- What was the effect of your response on the social movement (your role or generally)?
- 

#### TOPIC FIVE: IMPACT ON ACTIVISM, PERCEPTION OF SILENCE

How did the experience (s) shape your work? Activism and willingness to engage in gendered social movements

- Did it change anything?  
*Conversational Probes: If something did change what, how, and why?*
- *Do you think it has any impact on social movements generally?*
- *Any effect on your perspectives or choice of movements?*
- *If yes, Explain.*
- What do you think about people who simply go mute, stop engaging after things like this happen?