A young feminist political education initiative building bridges between feminist and queer movements in West Africa

Why Yemoja?

Known in Brazil as queen of the seas, in Cuba as mother of waters, and in Nigeria as the mother of all Orishas, the Yoruba deity Yemoja (also called Yemayá and Iemanjá) is often linked to images of motherhood and femininity. In the Yoruba pantheon she is the goddess of the river, the mother of fish, the mother of all things. Yemoja is fluid, queer, defying all strict categories, transcending binaries. She defies all definitions of femininity and yet reinforces and validates the feminine.

We begin with Yemoja as a way to acknowledge the centrality of femininity and womanhood in West African pre-colonial ontology. We call her name to challenge notions of feminism as inauthentically African. We call into the room the kind of West African feminism that we aim to promote - one that like water is fluid, flowing, accommodating, and central to the life, sustenance, and advancement of West African society. To all of us.

We invite our movements to join us on this journey of sharing, learning, being and becoming. We document so that we are seen, so that we cannot be ignored, brushed aside. We share as an act of solidarity. We ask you to come with us, so that we can build bridges between us, and towards the world Yemoja imagines for us.

CHEVS

Purposeful

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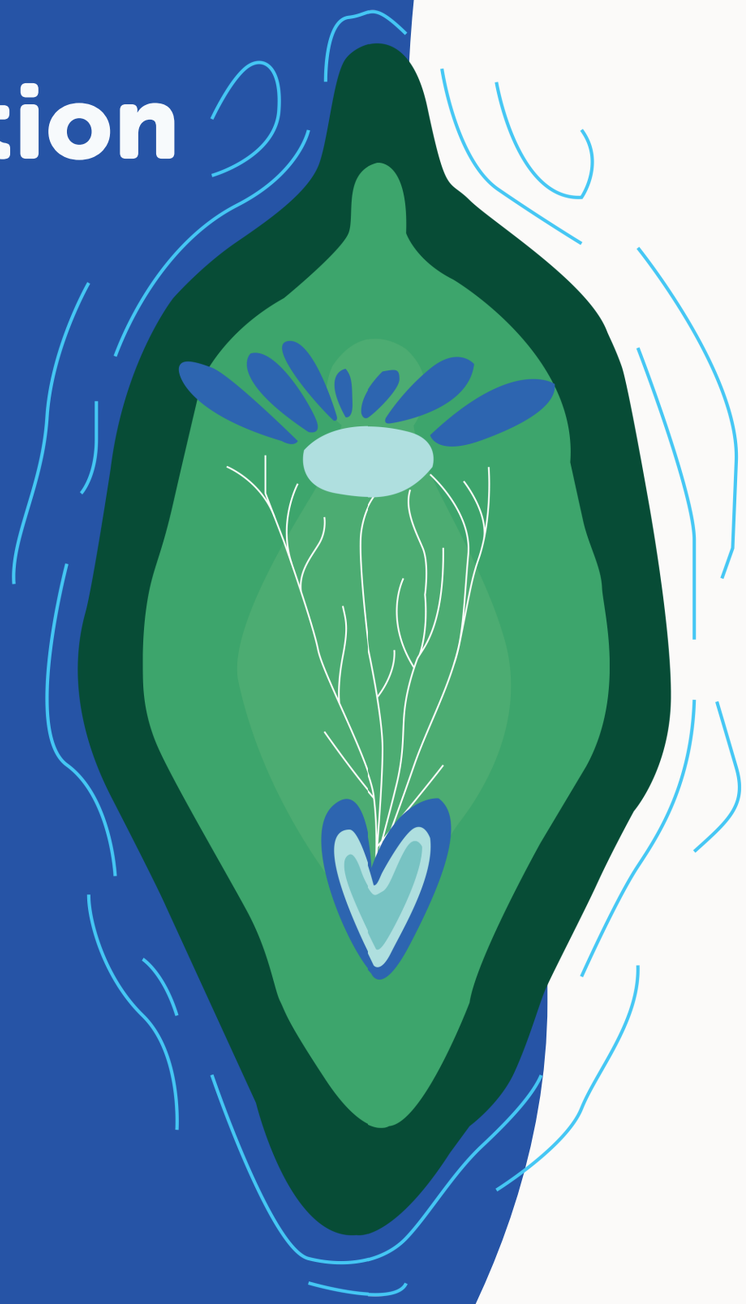
1. Introduction

None of us are free while any of us are not. Yet our movements are deeply divided. We need to build bridges between young queer feminists and African feminist movements if we are to secure the lives of dignity, safety and freedom that are our birthrights.

Feminist movements often transcend geographical boundaries to address global issues affecting minority groups. Centring the experiences and perspectives of Black, African, Queer and other marginalised groups in the evolution of feminist movements has been a complex and ongoing process. Despite the strides that have been made, feminist movements have excluded queer feminists and sex workers from their organising. It is surprising that the same feminist movements which are formed in response to systemic inequalities, discrimination and injustices, often become the agents perpetuating violence and discrimination against queer people. How do individuals who have themselves experienced the far-reaching impacts of discrimination end up then marginalising and excluding others?

The Yemoja Feminista Fellowship is a feminist political education space that fuses the best of popular education praxis with queer methodologies, spirit and politics. It was conceptualised from a conscious desire to promote inclusive feminist ideologies and replenish the feminist ranks through nurturing the agenda, improving the insights of young feminists and creating opportunities for emerging feminist activists to fully grapple with the nuances, the languages of feminism, gender, and the myriad of contentious issues that hold sway in a patriarchal African society.



It is within this transformative landscape that the Yemoja Feminista Fellowship emerges, like a nurturing embrace for young feminists yearning to make their mark. It aims to create opportunities for emerging feminist activists, allowing them to fully grapple with the nuances of feminism and to support them in building a West Africa that recognises and respects the rights and dignity of all individuals. By focusing on mentoring the next feminist generation, the programme serves as a significant tool for achieving the overall strategic goal of building power with and for young people, as envisioned by CHEVS.

Through mentorship and guidance, the Fellowship has provided tools that are needed to challenge the status quo. It's a journey of shared experiences, deep connections, and the cultivation of wisdom that only comes from embracing diversity and our collective power. Picture a vibrant tapestry where young trailblazers dive headfirst into the rich depths of feminism, gender dynamics, and the heated issues that dominate our world. It's a space to unapologetically explore, question, and grow. This isn't just about individual growth - it's about creating a seismic shift in power dynamics. The Yemoja Feminista Fellowship is a bold step towards building a movement that amplifies the voices of young people in West Africa, and collaboration is its secret weapon.

By bridging the gaps between women's organisations, LGBTQIA+ focused groups, sex workers, and abortion rights advocates, an unstoppable force of solidarity is uniting feminist activists in a harmonious symphony of justice. Together, they are dismantling the very foundations of inequality and reshaping the narrative - creating a West Africa where everyone can thrive.

It is within this transformative landscape that the Yemoja Feminista Fellowship emerges, like a nurturing embrace for young feminists yearning to make their mark.

2. Naming the Problem and Building Bridges

Still prevalent within African feminist spaces are the prejudices against and the exclusion of queer feminists, sex workers, and other minority groups. These misunderstandings or deliberate biases are rooted in patriarchy and other forms of systemic oppression, leading to fragmentation and diluting the potential collective power of feminist movements. It is evident that there is a need to dismantle barriers and build bridges between movements, and an essential need for the progression of feminist and queer activism, by:

- Holding each other accountable, acknowledging harmful behaviours and working collectively to rectify them.
- Having open and respectful dialogue that holds space for our unique experiences and perspectives.
- Being vulnerable with each other and taking collective action.

This is the only way we win.

"Accountability – it is something that we are still very much scared of... if we want that synergy we should be able to talk about accountability."
– Yemoja Feminista Fellow

The deliberate exclusion of queer folks in feminist spaces has presented itself in different forms. Some feminist movements and individuals insist on prioritising issues primarily affecting cisgender women, downplaying or even overlooking the specific challenges and needs of queer individuals, particularly those who are transgender or non-binary. Other feminist spaces believe that including queer folks and sex workers into feminist organising dilutes the movement and hold unrealistic phobias of contagion. Their justifications for this exclusion are rooted in the belief or notion that some ways of being and organising are more legitimate than others.

Young queer feminists are robbed of spaces to talk and advocate in collaboration with cis/hetero feminists. Even when they are physically present, the token inclusion of queer individuals in feminist spaces without genuine engagement or consideration of their perspectives and experiences perpetuates discrimination.

Some feminist literature, discussions, or campaigns may use exclusionary language - language that assumes heterosexuality or binary gender identities, thereby excluding or erasing the experiences of queer individuals. In some cases, feminist discourse perpetuates stereotypes and stigmatises queer individuals, reinforcing harmful narratives about their identities and relationships. These notions are particularly reinforced by gender-critical feminists, who base the political agenda of feminism solely on cisgender women.

Feminist funders often further perpetuate and reinforce this harm. Queer feminist activists - especially young queer activists - are routinely forced to frame their work within narrow cisfemale and Northern understandings of feminism, obscure whole parts of the movement(s) in which they are embedded, and re-name, and therefore, re-work their programmatic principles and operating models.

Queer feminists experience a plethora of issues that simply cannot be addressed when a hetero lens is applied to feminist organising and activism. It is this failure to address intersectionality, overlooking the unique struggles of queer individuals, that has resulted in tensions and division between feminist and queer movements.

Why build a collective and inclusive West African feminist movement with young feminists?

There is a need to promote inclusive feminist ideologies and replenish the feminist ranks in West Africa due to the entrenched patriarchal structures that shape society. These structures perpetuate gender inequality, discriminatory norms, and criminalisation of sexual rights and freedoms. Faced not only with patriarchal structures, the feminist movement is also bedevilled by colonialism and paternalism which creates pockets of divide in our collective desire for equality.

A collective and inclusive West African feminist movement, bolstered by the participation of young feminists, brings transformative change by amplifying women's voices, challenging patriarchal and colonialist norms, and addressing gender inequality. The inclusion of young feminists injects fresh perspectives and energy, fostering intergenerational dialogue and knowledge transfer. This movement cultivates solidarity, enabling feminists from diverse backgrounds to collaborate, share resources, and coordinate efforts. It challenges harmful gender norms, inspires women and girls, and promotes inclusivity for marginalised groups, including LGBTQIA+ individuals and sex workers. By creating a platform for change, this movement reshapes societal norms, empowers individuals, and drives progress forward towards gender justice.

3. Origins of the Yemoja Feminista Fellowship

The Yemoja Feminista Fellowship was born in 2022, during the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR) hosted by Purposeful in Sierra Leone - conceived from a moment of pain and loss, and the profound possibility of re-connecting our struggles. This landmark conference for the Continent was not all flowers and rainbows. Queer individuals and people with disabilities faced a series of issues, as young queer feminists talked about experiencing exclusion from older feminists in their work and their spaces. This led to the idea for the Fellowship - rooted in the same issues experienced over the years of organising.

"I've attended lots of conferences, but this was my first time in a practical feminist space. The first time seeing people walk the talk around feminist organising in a liberatory space. Despite the laws in Sierra Leone about queer people and LGBTQIA+ identities, the conference was positioned as a safe haven. This intentionality piqued my interest. I wanted to be in reflection and in a relationship about how we bring this possibility into feminist spaces more broadly."
– Justin Chidozie, Director, CHEVS.

"ACSHR was a powerful convergence moment for young feminist activists in Sierra Leone and from across the Continent. As much as the conference was a success, it also brought into sharp focus how much work we have to do as infrastructure for young feminist organising - how many bridges there are to build. The political foundations of our collective work need to be invested in and nurtured. There was a deep exclusion of young queer activists even within so-called liberated feminist zones. The conference for us has become an opening - showing both what is, and what can be. What can be if we partner like our lives depend on it. If we build bridges to a world we know is possible. One where all of us are safe, and seen, and free."
– Rosa Bransky,
Co-Founder & Co-CEO, Purposeful

The conference experience kickstarted an unconventional relationship between Purposeful and CHEVS, and subsequently the Yemoja Feminista Fellowship. Unconventional, because it transcends the typical funder/fundee relationship. It is one of friendship, and this friendship has yielded three valuable and practical lessons in transformational funding partnerships.

- **Co-creation:** Together, Purposeful and CHEVS crafted the terms of engagement. There was no 15-page document filled with legal terms to review and sign, nor any stringent formalities. There were just two pages that exemplified an equitable partnership. People should have the power and autonomy to discuss the partnerships they are entering.
- **Trust:** With a $50,000 grant, Purposeful provided CHEVS with support for the Fellowship as a continuation of the work that had begun at ACSHR. CHEVS cited this as the first time their team had ever been consulted about a preference for receiving funds - as staged instalments or as a single sum. This gesture spoke deeply of the substantial level of trust. Purposeful recognised that CHEVS was focused on building and sustaining an organisation, and not merely on executing a single programme.
- **Accompaniment:** For CHEVS, the level of support that accompanied the funding was unprecedented. Purposeful continued to support and stay involved, remaining engaged in a way that preserved their autonomy by asking, 'How can we assist you? How can we contribute? How can we best support?'

This exemplified authentic support and companionship.

The Yemoja Feminista Fellowship Objectives:

- To contribute to the African feminist movement through grassroots mobilisation and education.
- To foster ideological solidarity between feminist and pro-choice/LGBTQIA+ ideologies in West Africa.
- To grow a movement of West African feminists who embody the teachings of a comprehensive pan-African feminist and queer ideology.
- To create an enabling atmosphere for increased collaboration between girl-focused and women's organisations, LGBTQIA+ focused, and disability rights organisations.

Hopes and Dreams for the Fellowship

"Feminism is not just a cisgender women's rights movement. It is for all of us. All-encompassing. Feminists should be able to raise their voices when it concerns sex workers, when it concerns persons with a disability, when it concerns young people. This is the dream for the Yemoja Feminista Fellowship - to build a new generation of young African feminists."
– Justin Chidozie, Co-Director, CHEVS.

"I'm hoping that we will birth disruptors within the feminist space in Africa. We want young Africans to be radical feminists, taking charge to ensure their voices are heard. We want a chain of disruption where we see more young feminists charging each other up, occupying spaces. If we achieve that, it's just like lighting the fire. We are lighting the fire within the African feminist space and ensuring that each person we reach is starting a fire within their own contexts, within their country, within their spaces, and within their movements. And we hope that in the next ten years, we have a more robust African feminist space where we can really hear and see the voices and presence of young queer feminists."
– Anita Graham, Programme Specialist, CHEVS

"The goal is to be a resource hub for feminists in the region. To provide a space where young feminists, especially those who are not a part of the Fellowship, can access resources and information to fuel and support their activism."
– Ene Ijato, Communications Lead, CHEVS

4. Building our Collective Foundations:

The Yemoja Grounding Curriculum

Taking place across four-days in April, 2023, the first Yemoja Feminista Fellowship bootcamp was a transformative experience, uniting 15 young feminists from diverse backgrounds to explore and promote feminist justice. From the outset, the atmosphere buzzed with excitement as participants from across West Africa; Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana converged in The Gambia, bringing their unique perspectives and expertise.

"Coming from a conservative background, it has been a journey for me to embrace feminism fully. But witnessing the injustices and realising the importance of equality has pushed me to challenge my own beliefs. I'm still learning, but I believe in the power of feminism to create positive change."
- Isha Abis Kamara, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

The Fellowship encompassed a wide range of sessions led by renowned feminist scholars and activists. Thought-provoking discussions challenged assumptions and expanded the understanding of feminist justice. Collaborative workshops and activities fostered connections and innovative strategies among Fellows as they shared their opinions and creative ideas on issues crucial to achieving intersectional feminism. The bootcamp celebrated diverse voices and created an inclusive space for learning and forging lasting connections.

"I've never felt so seen and validated before. Knowing that queerness was not only acknowledged but celebrated in pre-colonial Africa gives me a profound sense of belonging and pride in my identity."
- Aliyah Baana Ibrahim, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

To Understand African Feminisms We Must Go Back And Fetch That Which Was Left Behind

"To understand who we are is to understand what we do."
- Omolara, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

For centuries, African women have carried society on their backs. Despite their pivotal roles in political and social movements, their contributions have been dismissed and erased. African history has been shaped to revolve around men and dominated by Eurocentric perspectives. History has traditionally favoured those in positions of power - heterosexual, white men. Even now, as we resist and rewrite 'Herstory', we sometimes find ourselves perpetuating the very patterns we aim to dismantle.

Minna Salami posits that a male-centric and Eurocentric bias has shaped knowledge production as "Europatriarchal Knowledge" - an epistemology that impacts all knowledge production including historiography. Europatriarchal knowledge centres Western imperialism in Africa's story, and male supremacy in women's realities.

During colonial times, entire tribes and villages in Africa endured the ravages of plunder. It is important that we acknowledge these historical injustices as we move forward in reshaping our narrative. It is even more important for us to acknowledge that the history of Africa long predates slavery and colonialism. Ignoring this suggests passivity on both Africa's and women's part and makes little room for understanding African women's resistance movements. An Africa existed before slavery and colonialism and it is that Africa we must seek to understand. Embracing the concept of 'Sankofa' - we must go back and retrieve what was left behind.

We are African feminists. And to be African feminists, we cannot live by white feminism. For black, African women, it is the master's tool. It is difficult to fully and rightly define African Feminism in a way that feels all-encompassing. This first bootcamp explored the organising work of the transnational community of African feminists.

African feminism is the culmination of movements, shared lived experiences, intellectual rigour, critical consciousness raising, kinship and knowledge sharing that is potentially limitless in its exploration and application. African feminism has existed since the beginning of time.

While we remind ourselves that women's erasure from history is an intentional act designed to maintain women's subjugation – rendering them devoid of power and voice - we know for a fact that African women organised and resisted: women like Adelaide Casely-Hayford, the Sierra Leonean women's rights activist referred to as the 'African Victorian Feminist', who contributed widely to both pan-African and feminist goals; like Charlotte Maxeke, who in 1918, founded the Bantu Women's League in South Africa; women like Huda Sharaawi, who in 1923 established the Egyptian Feminist Union; women like the Mau-Mau rebel, Wambui Otieno, the freedom-fighters Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Margaret Ekpo and Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, and women like Yaa Asantewaa, Mabel Dove, Wangari Maathai, Ama Ata Aidoo, Lindiwe Mabuza and Leymah Gbowee.

The names, identities and resistance of these women were never recorded in history books. We say their names here. We acknowledge them. We thank them. We owe it to them to honour their strategies and their sacrifices. When we acknowledge the foundations upon which we stand, we are taller, stronger and more powerful. This Fellowship proclaimed their names out loud as an offering, an honouring, a reminder of our blood lines.

"The master's tool will never dismantle the master's house."
- Audre Lorde[1]

Huda Sharawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union

Huda Sharawi was a prominent Egyptian feminist and women's rights activist who played a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights and social change in Egypt during the early 20th century. She is best known for her efforts in founding the Egyptian Feminist Union and her activism in advancing women's education, legal rights, and participation in public life. Huda Sharawi's legacy continues to inspire feminists and women's rights activists, not only in Egypt but around the world. Her work remains a testament to the strength of grassroots activism in driving societal change.

The origins of African feminism can also be traced to other phenomenal women, including, but not limited to the Mau-Mau rebel, Wambui Otieno; the freedom-fighters Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Margaret Ekpo and Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti; Charlotte Maxeke, Founder of the Bantu Women's League; Wangari Maathai, Founder of the Green Belt Movement; Senegalese writer Mariama Ba; Miriam Makeba, musician and civil rights activist; and Bibi Titi Mohamed, the first female member of the Tanganyika African National Union.

The Waves of African Feminisms

Proto-feminism: 17th -19th Century

This era was characterised by women who defied patriarchal ideologies and wielded power that resisted traditional structures. The Ajogie Warriors of present-day Benin Republic, Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba, Queen Mother Idia of present-day Bini Kingdom in Nigeria, Queen Nanny of the Jamaican Maroons, Queen Amina of Zaria, Yaa Asantewaa of present-day Ghana, healers, priestesses, cults, and chief market women exemplify the proto-feminist wave.

African Women in Feminist Formation: 1900s - 1960s

This era was characterised by women who actively led liberation, independence, and decolonisation movements and the struggle for women's emancipation. They were at the forefront of opposing colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy and shaped the foundations of African feminism as we now know it. These included women such as Josina Machel, a revolutionary fighter and leader within the Mozambican independence movement - FRELIMO; Kenyan political activist Wambui Otieno; Nigerian suffragist and educator Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti; the Kikuyu women in the Harry Thuku Disturbances and Aba women who revolted in 1922 and 1929 against heavy taxes and British colonial policies; and the Anlu Uprising by Kom women in present-day Cameroon between 1958-1959 which rendered the paramount chief and his executive council impotent, and contributed to displacing the Kamerun National Congress from power and facilitating the Kamerun National Democratic Party into power during the 1959 elections; the Ewe market women of present-day Lomé who drove resistance, garnered political authority and corralled economic power in their favour; and over 20,000 South African women who led one of the country's largest demonstration ever in 1956 to protesting the compulsory carrying of passes by Black South African women.

1st Rise of African Feminism: 1970s - 1990s

This wave of African feminism was the first group of women who claimed their identities as African feminists. The era birthed African feminist writings such as Awa Thiam's Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa, Filomina Steady's African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective and Carol Boyce Davies and Ann Adams Graves Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature, and these shaped feminist political ideology across Africa, along with movements such as Yewwu-Yewwi, the pioneer feminist movement in Senegal in 1984.

The growth of the African feminist movement in this era was also influenced by pivotal events, including the first United Nations (UN) Women's Conference in 1975, where critical consciousness about the status of women globally was raised. The UN Decade for Women was declared to run from 1975 - 1985, focusing on policies and issues directly impacting women. The movement was also fuelled by the landmark UN General Assembly's adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CDEAW) in 1979 and the global growth of Women's Studies.

2nd Rise of African Feminism: 2000s - Present

With the turn of the century, advancements in internet connectivity and social media contributed to the rise of the second wave of African feminism. This era is characterised by full acceptance of the feminist label and identity, a critical introspection into decolonising our identities as African feminists, leveraging new media and technology to draw attention to and tackle pertinent social justice issues, and advocating for transformative change. This era has also been defined by the Charter of Feminist Principles For African Feminists, developed in 2006 as an affirmation of commitment to feminist principles; the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights, adopted in 2003 to reaffirm comprehensive rights for women and girls in Africa.

Understanding Gender and Power Relations

Understanding gender and power relations involves examining the ways in which gender identity and expression intersect with social, political, economic, and cultural structures to create hierarchies of power and privilege. It encompasses the analysis of how societal norms, beliefs, and expectations shape the roles, opportunities, and treatment of individuals based on their perceived gender. Recognising the complexities of these dynamics and their impacts on individuals and society is essential for fostering a more equitable and just world.

The collective mantra at the Fellowship was asking one another, when asked to do something, 'What type of power are you using now?' It became amusing as participants answered, 'this is power together' or 'this is power to' or 'this is power over'. Everyone left the bootcamp with an extremely practical understanding of what power relations meant in their everyday lives, along with the interplay with gender.

Gender and power are intricately linked, even within our intimate relationships, whether heteronormative or not. The presence of power dynamics is sometimes very obvious and at other times, not. These structures determine the 'roles' of each party in these relationships, and almost always put women at a disadvantage. As Fellowship discussions highlighted, this stems from the belief that power is a limited resource which should be hoarded. A deeper dive into this assumption leads us to uncover how structures and systems of oppression have been strategically established, contributing to a significant gender divide.

To challenge the gender disparity stemming from these unfounded beliefs, the Fellowship explored how collective growth, collaboration, and co-creation pave the way for 'power within'. This form of power is essential, sitting alongside 'power with'.

Fellows talked about the power to be productive - power that has a generative potential and can be used to create new possibilities, curated without using the relationship of dominance. We all can be different and recognise that others are different without feeling threatened. We learn that the power within us is to recognise individual differences whilst respecting each other, and in turn, to know our self-worth and self-knowledge. By doing so, we refrain from projecting our own issues onto others, preventing them from enduring what we ourselves have suffered.

Bootcamp discussions extended to understanding how oppression works, how someone can be free in one system yet oppressed in another, and that if we are to truly destroy all forms of oppression, we cannot cherry pick our activism.

Understanding power: practical tools to use in your work

Power mapping is a great tool that helps navigate the various dimensions of power in different situations or environments as power is exercised within the dynamics of relationships.
When power mapping, consider the following:

1. **What kinds of power do I have?**
   - It can be power under, which makes us feel overwhelmed and not in control; power over, which makes us feel strong and able but alone and isolated; power to, which makes us feel like we are able to make a difference; power within, which relies on our sense of self-knowledge and worth; or power with, which is the kind that is shared and nurtured by collaborations, relationships, and social power.
2. **What kinds of power do others have?**
3. **How do we build shared and collaborative power (power with)?**
   - A primary factor is fostering relationships based on authentic connections, mutual respect, love, empathy, accountability, and shared vision for the future.
   - Value and leverage on the unique competencies and skills each person brings to the team.
   - Practise co-leadership and collaborative decision making, valuing each person's opinions and contributions.
   - Support capacity strengthening initiatives across the team.
   - Prioritise self-care, health, and wellbeing of all, irrespective of their position in the team.
   - Incorporate individual and corporate feminist ethics and principles into ways of working and collaboration.

Commit to the practice of ethical feminist leadership.

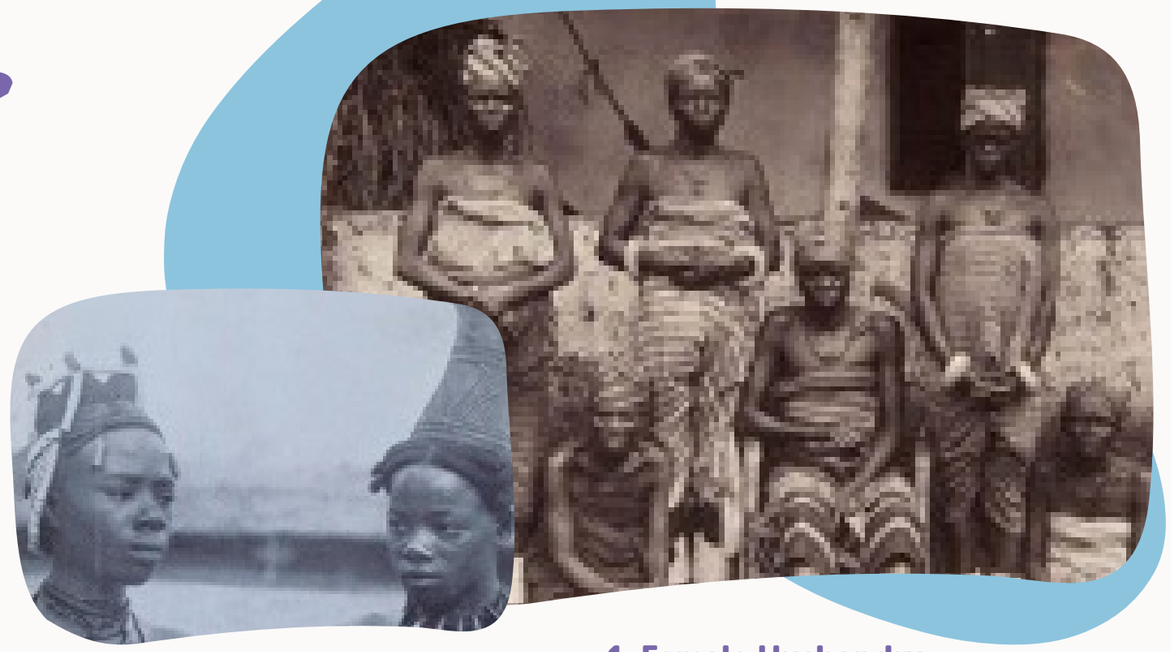
LGBTQIA+ Identities in West Africa

Africa, especially West Africa, has always been queer! We reject the misconception that non-heteronormative identities are a recent Western influence. We acknowledge the historical presence and diversity of LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships across the African continent.

Prior to European colonisation, we see more relaxed attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity throughout the African continent. Many African countries did not see gender as a binary in the way that their European colonisers did, nor did they correlate anatomy to gender identity.

As far back as 2400 BC, excavated tombs in ancient Egypt have revealed the depiction of two men, Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, locked in a lovers' embrace. Beyond their progressive acceptance of same-sex relationships, Ancient Egyptians, similar to other civilisations at the time, not only acknowledged the existence of a third gender, but venerated it. Many deities were portrayed androgynously, and goddesses such as Mut (the goddess of Motherhood) and Sekmeht (the goddess of war) are often depicted as women with erect penises.

In the 16th century, the Imbangala people of Angola had men in womens apparel, whom they kept amongst their wives. In contrast, King Henry VIII had just signed the Buggery Act in 1533 in England, which criminalised sex between two men. The last instance of men being sentenced to death by hanging in England for engaging in homosexual sex occurred in 1835. This coincided with the reign of King Mwanga II of Buganda, now part of Uganda, who openly identified as gay, and resisted Christianity and colonialism.



The Igbo and Yoruba tribes, found mostly in present-day Nigeria, did not have a strict gender binary. They did not typically assign gender to babies at birth, instead waiting until later in life. Similarly, the Dagaaba people (present-day Ghana) assigned gender not based on one's anatomy, but rather the energy exuded by the individual.

As part of this first bootcamp, Justin Chidozie led a session on LGBTQIA+ identities in pre-colonial African societies that revealed a rich atmosphere of accommodation and legitimacy. The revelations shared, shattered all preconceived notions and exposed Fellows to a hidden history that has long been overlooked. Eight significant practices were explored that each legitimised queerness in precolonial Africa.

1. Female Husbandry

This is one of the oldest queer practices in Africa, found in over 40 African cultures, both ancient and contemporary. This is the practice of a wealthy, powerful or influential woman marrying other women for the sake of reproduction and sometimes erotic relationships - Kuria of Tanzania, Nuer of Sudan, Igbo of Nigeria, Nandi and Kisii of Kenya are just some examples. One prominent figure in history known for this practice was Nzinga Mbande of Mbundu, Angola. She was a powerful king and married women and "male wives".

2. Affairs of the "Mudoko Dako"

In the pre-colonial period, among the Langi people of Northern Uganda, effeminate males known as Mudoko Dako, were treated as women and were able to marry men.

3. Same Sex Spiritual Eroticism

In some parts of Africa, it is believed that same-sex acts possess spiritual benefits, and so practised as a source of power. This practice is seen in the Ndebele and Shona tribes in Zimbabwe, Nupe in Nigeria, Azande in Sudan & Congo, Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi.

4. Male Daughters

This is common among the Igbo in Nigeria. It is a practice that allows a daughter to remain in her father's house and take the role of a son to continue the family lineage.

5. Androgynous

Many African deities were portrayed androgynously, and goddesses such as Mut - the goddess of Motherhood (literal translation: Mother) and Sekmeht - the goddess of war - are often depicted as women with erect penises.

6. Crossdressing

Cross-dressing has a deep traditional history, and in many African traditions clothing was not gendered. Men could wear what is presently considered 'women's clothing'. A documentary shows popular Nigerian cross-dresser, Area Scatter, performing for the royal family in one of the Igbo communities in Nigeria in the 1970's. Area Scatter quit their job as a civil servant to become an entertainer in the royal palace - the film showing this as a fully accepted role as the king, queen and other chiefs applaud at the end of the performance.

7. Languages of Queer Existence

Before colonialism, queer people were referred to with different names. In Shangaan of South Africa, there is the male wife; In Senegal, homosexual men are called 'gordigen'; In Hausa, Nigeria, gay men are called 'yan daudu'. Most of Africa's indigenous languages are not binary, with no male or female pronouns.

8. Zvibanda, Chibados, Quintana, Gangas & Kibamba

In Angola and Namibia, a caste of male diviners were believed to carry powerful female spirits that they would pass on to fellow men through sexual intimacy. They believed it guaranteed bountiful yield and abundant hunting.

Colonialism and its Impact

So how then, despite a very relaxed attitude towards homosexuality and gender fluidity for almost all its recorded history, has Africa become one of the most difficult continents to be LGBTQIA+?

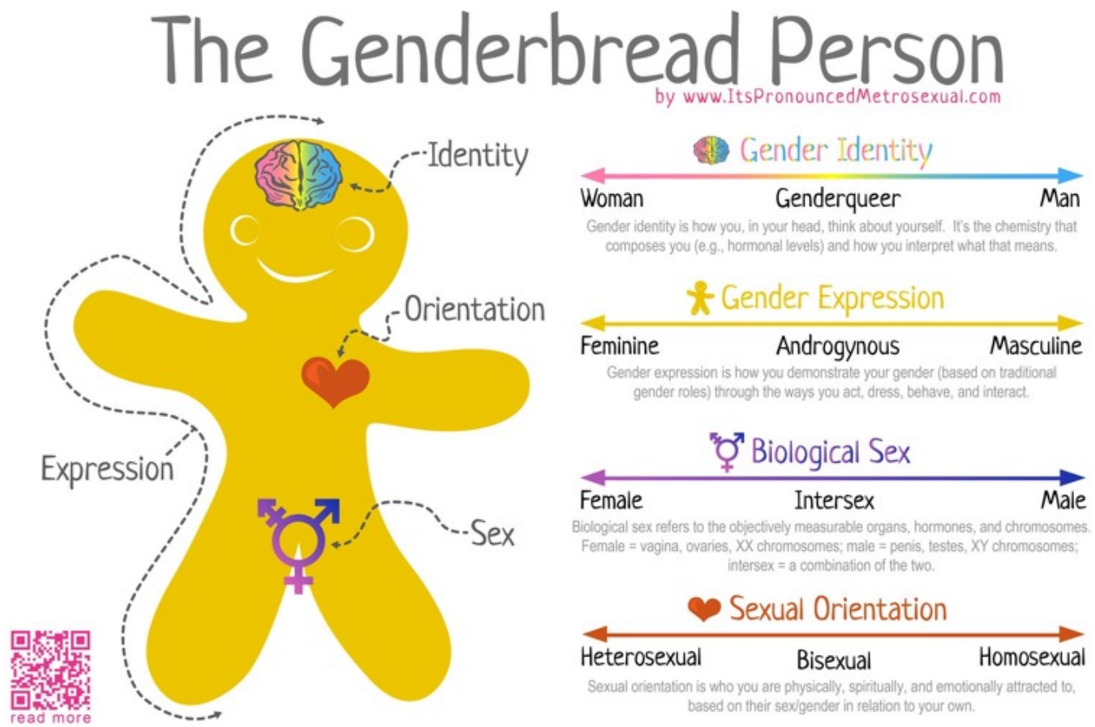
As the bootcamp conversations progressed, the impact of colonialism came into focus. Colonisation and the spread of fundamentalist Christian attitudes from the West meant that much of Africa lost its previous cultural attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity and was forced to adopt religious values from British colonisers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Homophobia was legally enforced by colonial administrators and Christian missionaries. In 1910, Christians made up about nine percent of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa; by 2010, the figure had leapt to 63 percent. Anti-LGBT laws were not only written into constitutions, but also into the minds of many African people, and after the passing of several generations, this became dogma.

Fellows in the bootcamp voiced their frustration over the erasure and suppression of African cultures, identities, and practices enforced by colonial powers. Together they mourned the loss of diverse gender and sexual expressions, recognising the profound consequences of such erasure on our understanding of self and heritage.

The session was a catalyst for introspection and a call to action, awakening the urgency of reclaiming lost narratives and embracing the vibrant LGBTQIA+ identities that were present in pre-colonial Africa. With newfound knowledge and a reinvigorated sense of purpose, Fellows expressed a renewed commitment to challenging societal norms, amplifying marginalised voices, and building a future rooted in inclusivity and acceptance.

"Perhaps the most pivotal segment of this session was the clarification on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC). This space compelled us to explore and question our knowledge and values; digging deep into our roots and the inherent biases that may underlie them.

This was a judgement-free zone which afforded everyone the right to our opinion while fostering an environment of healthy questioning and dialogue. We did not shy away from the difficult and politically incorrect opinions and conversations. The overall goal of the task was to scrutinise our values and engage in transforming them throughout the fellowship. Ultimately, we were reminded that our prejudices against queer individuals are deeply rooted in colonialism."
– Melvina N'yillah Conton, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

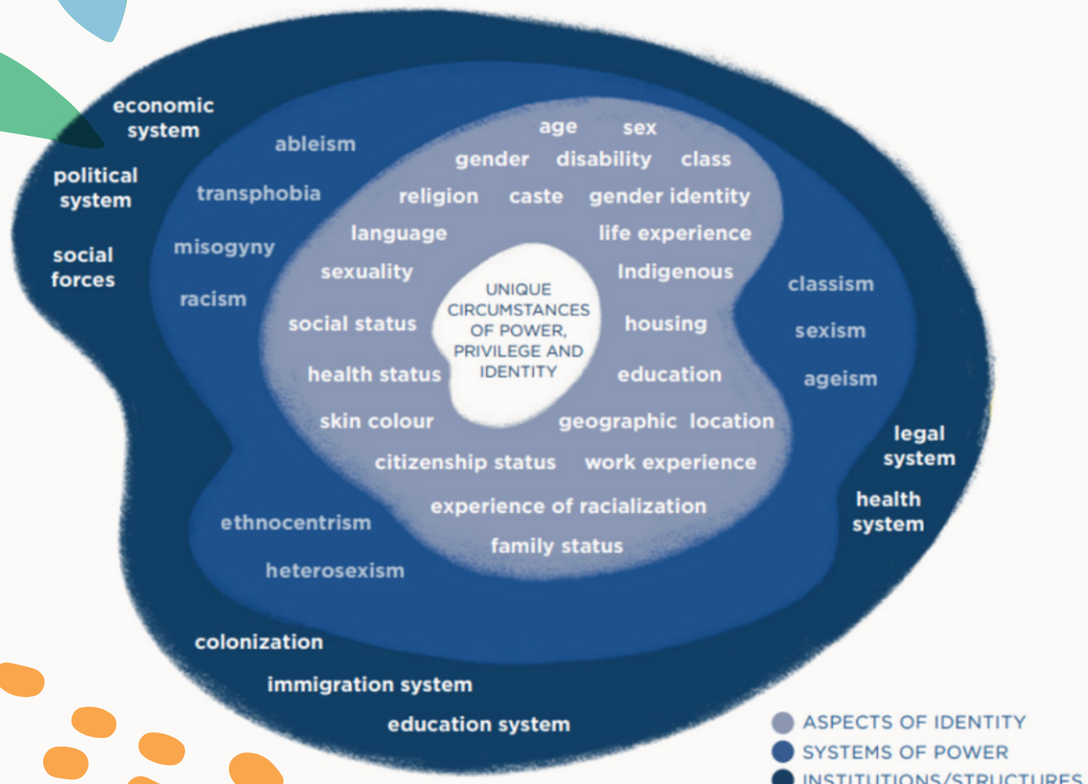


Intersectionality in the feminist movement

"As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist Socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong."
– Audre Lorde[2]

Intersectionality examines the unique circumstances of power, privilege and identity and how they interact with patriarchal systems and structures to reinforce inequalities.

"Intersectionality provides the framework for understanding the complex impacts of overlapping systems of oppression – such as patriarchy, racism, white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, among others – on women, men and gender-diverse people's lives."
– Prabha Khosla[3]



"Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."
– Kimberlé Crenshaw[4]

The bootcamp session, led by Anita Graham focussed on what intersectionality is not. It stands apart from diversity, social inclusion, and a gender-first approach. It is also not an afterthought, white-centred or a funding catchword. This eye-opening discussion led Fellows to explore how diversity is often mistaken for intersectionality, and discussion fostered an understanding that while diversity is more physical - like skin colour, ethnicity, and physical appearance - that intersectionality draws on the individual or group experiences over the years.

Intersectionality is understanding and accepting that our individual differences are linked, and how these systems constantly overlap in oppressing individuals. In discussing intersectionality and the feminist movement, conversation flowed towards understanding the importance of cross-movement organising - a collective organising built on the premise of understanding the different nuances of personal and collective experiences.

Intersectionality helps us understand the importance of cross-movement organising.

- It should be focused on what we are fighting for.
- It should tackle oppression directly.
- It should be based on communal love, hope and commitment.
- It should acknowledge our differences and strengths.
- It should be politically clear so we can make a real difference.
- We should be able to build strategic alliances without losing community autonomy.

Privilege for Sale

Privilege can often be invisible to those who have it, while it can be glaringly obvious to those who do not. This activity is designed to help individuals understand and reflect upon their own privilege, and intended to encourage self-awareness, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that shape our lives. The full activity can be found here.

At bootcamp, the Fellows were divided into groups for a 'Privilege for Sale' activity. Each group was equipped with tokens worth different amounts, representing currency for purchasing different privileges. The groups with more tokens had an easier time choosing what privileges they could purchase. This was not the same for the other groups - less money meant less purchasing power. The exercise gained further depth as the intersections of individual privileges and needs were recognised, and the realisation prompted collaborative efforts among group members, fostering discussions about the privileges to collectively advocate for and purchase.

Implementing intersectionality in practice can be complex and challenging. It requires ongoing self-awareness, education, and a commitment to examining one's own biases and privileges.

As young feminists across West Africa, we are reminded of the words of Audre Lorde:

"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." [5]

JASS Cycles of Movement Building

https://werise-toolkit.org/en/cycles-movement-building#cycle-strategy-questions

'Movement building isn't linear, and there isn't a formula or one right place to start. Like any kind of change, it both leaps ahead at times and loops back at others. Different—and ever changing—contexts and challenges require different strategic choices and approaches. We need to be smart, creative, and adaptive.

These 4 interconnected Cycles of Movement Building - Rising Up, Building Up, Standing Up and Shaking Up - help you assess Where You Are in Your Movement Building Strategy and what cycle might be most useful for you.'

Feminist accountability looks like:

- Centring our practices and discourses on love and care.
- Acknowledging our damaged and oppressive systems.
- Approaching accountability from a proactive basis.
- Focusing on community and collective accountability.
- Understanding and acknowledging power relations.
- Making things right when harm occurs.

"Accountability is an internal resource for recognising and redressing harms we have caused to ourselves and others".
- Ann Russo[6]

Centring Disability Justice

Centring disability justice involves prioritising the voices, needs, and rights of disabled individuals in all aspects of society. It is a framework that aims to challenge and rectify the systemic inequalities and ableism that often marginalise and exclude people with disabilities.

Centring disability justice is about moving beyond the conventional approaches to disability, which often focus on 'fixing' disabled individuals, and instead, embracing a social model that acknowledges the barriers society imposes on them. It requires a commitment to challenging and changing these barriers to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

At bootcamp, Fatou Baldeh took the Fellows through the intricate concept of ableism. Skillfully defining ableism, she offered insightful examples to illustrate its manifestations in society. The discussion further delved into the nuanced aspects of positive and negative ableism, shedding light on the impact of these attitudes and behaviours on individuals with disabilities.

Fatou's exploration of disability justice extended to personal experiences, and emphasised the importance of inclusivity, intersectionality, and anti-capitalist politics within the movement. The session introduced the principles of disability justice, which encompass values such as centring the leadership of those most affected, fostering cross-movement organising, and embracing a holistic approach to justice.

Disability manifests in diverse and sometimes inconspicuous ways. While certain disabilities are immediately identifiable due to their visibility, others are not. Facilitation skillfully crafted a space for Fellows to reflect on behaviours, and to dismantle biases and presumptions that might have been held towards individuals with disabilities, and how we can often close down spaces to people living with disabilities in our feminist advocacy and activism - an uncomfortable but necessary conversation within feminist discourse.

Fellows learned that the movement should be diverse and not just on paper, and the importance of holding space for people with disabilities to voluntarily engage in our movements. We need to constantly examine our power and privilege when engaging with people with disabilities in these spaces.

After sharing collective stories, and with new understanding of how to intentionally co-create spaces for people living with disabilities, the bootcamp session was rounded off with one robust shared statement:

Until discrimination against people with disabilities is stopped, we can never really be free because our freedom is interconnected.

Healing Justice: A framework for collective liberation

"There is nothing as liberating as ritualising your joy."
- Dr. Toyin Ajao

Feminist organising is work. It can be joyful and fulfilling, but it is work. And this work often leads to burn out which can take a heavy toll on our bodies, our minds, our hearts and our souls. Acknowledging the hurt and trauma inflicted by oppressive systems and power structures is the first step to holistically healing our individual and collective pain. Healing justice is rooted in practices that address both the individual and collective, and these practices will take on different forms that meet the needs of the individual or the community.

Healing justice in feminist organising seeks to holistically respond to and intervene in generational trauma and violence, and to engage in collective practices that transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies and hearts.

Led by Dr. Toyin Ajao, Fellows explored the power of feminist values and the significance of various forms of healing justice. Driven by the belief in equality and inclusivity, feminism strives to dismantle oppressive systems and create a just society for all. The session delved into the different dimensions of justice, encompassing social, economic, and political aspects, highlighting the need for comprehensive transformation. Dr. Toyin emphasised the importance of radical rest and joy as acts of resistance against the demands of an often exhausting world. By reclaiming rest and embracing joy, individuals reclaim their agency and challenge the notion that productivity is the sole measure of worth.

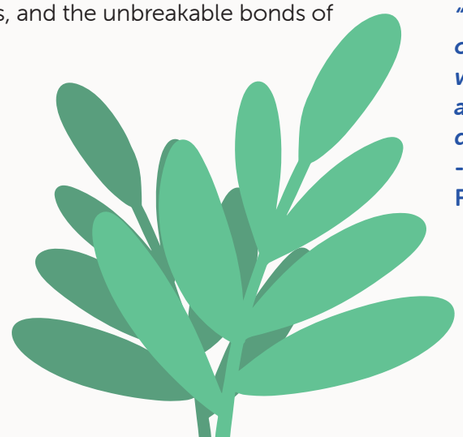
Healing justice in feminist organising is a powerful and transformative approach that honours our humanity and well-being, encouraging a shift from a culture of sacrifice to one of holistic care and collective healing.

In a deeply moving session, the Fellows embarked on a transformative journey within the Ubuntu healing circle.

"In that circle, I felt seen and heard in a way I had never experienced before. Sharing my story and witnessing the raw vulnerability of others allowed me to release years of pain and embrace healing."
- Yati Suricia Conteh, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

The Ubuntu healing circle is a collective/communal gathering that promotes healing, connection and mutual support. It draws inspiration from the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, often translated as "I am because we are". Ubuntu emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals and the idea that our individual well-being is intricately linked to our collective well-being. Ubuntu healing circles are sanctuaries for black bodies, minds, and spirits to experience safety, love, and strength from each other in times of need. At the core of the circle is the profound art of active listening, devoid of interruption or advice.

Guided by Dr. Toyin's gentle presence, Fellows discovered the power of collective healing. In the sacred space of this circle, stories intertwined, weaving a tapestry of resilience. The Ubuntu healing circle stands as a testament to the transformative intimacy found in open hearts, shared stories, and the unbreakable bonds of sisterhood.



"We listened, we laughed, cried, held each other in deep embrace, and held space in each other's hearts. Without reservation, we bared our vulnerabilities, nurturing an unbreakable trust amongst us. We found comfort and power in the realisation of our shared identities as young, African feminists, sharing intimate stories that carried the weight of our past struggles. Each shared experience was met with compassion, creating a sanctuary where wounds could be confronted and healing could begin.

The circle came alive as we uplifted and supported each other. As the session concluded, a profound sense of unity permeated the room. We left the circle with a deep sense of belonging. We left with the knowledge that healing does not have to be a solitary endeavour, but a collective journey towards restoration.

"The Ubuntu healing circle taught me the beauty of collective healing. We shared our deepest wounds and found solace in the compassion and empathy of one another. In that circle I discovered the strength of sisterhood."
- Melvina N'yillah Conton, Yemoja Feminista Fellow

Practical Tools for Healing Justice

1. Drink herbal tea, eat healthy food, and drink plenty of water.
2. Go for holistic therapy e.g; talk therapy, acupuncture, and/or reiki.
3. Practice self-acceptance and affirmations to release and restore.
4. Seek Holistic Psychosocial Support – through ancient healing circles or modern support groups.
5. Use storytelling and expressive writing approaches to unburden and for gratitude journaling.
6. Spend time in nature (walk, hike, dance), clean and organise your environment, and engage in gardening.
7. Incorporate meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, and physical fitness activities into daily/weekly activities.
8. Go for regular medical check-ups and embark on preventative approaches rather than symptomatic treatment.
9. Unplug from technology from time to time and excuse yourself from technology overconsumption.
10. Ritualise your joy through quality sleep, travelling adventure, erotic pleasure, intentional rest, contagious laughter, and the cry of liberation.
11. Engage in healing arts - both expressive and visual - such as painting, singing, dancing, listening to music or composing music, sound healing, writing, reading, playing the instruments, and watching beneficial movies.
12. Care for something: be a parent, or a pet or plant parent.
13. Experience hydrotherapy or swimming and explore massages, and aromatherapy, using essential oil for inner and environmental calmness.

Echoes of Gratitude:

Yemoja Feminista Fellows' testimonials

"When I learned about the fellowship, I was curious about the connection between Yemoja and the feminist movement. Intersectionality and engaging capacity building stood out to me. I'm excited for the advocacy work to follow on crucial issues."
- Maria Okwoli

"Being in this space, the knowledge, interactions, and collective work were so engaging. I felt a strong sense of connection. I'm looking forward to a nurturing and supportive collective."
- Yati Suricia Conteh

"Every session was something I eagerly anticipated. Meeting diverse feminists and having time for reflection and questioning have been invaluable. I'm eager to explore the history of feminism in Africa and discuss it with my mother."
- Jugu Maureen Lawson

"After multiple rejections from other fellowships, being here has changed my perspective. I plan to take what I've learned back to Nigeria and support feminist organisations and movements."
- Aliyah Baana Ibrahim

"I didn't expect to learn so much about African feminism. This fellowship exposed me to new aspects like LGBTQI+ rights and sex workers' rights. The openness and non-judgmental space, especially as a hijabi, made me feel at ease."
- Isha Abis Kamara

"As someone already involved in feminist work, this fellowship has been an incredible addition. Learning about African feminism from the African perspective and meeting amazing feminists has been enlightening."
- Massah Esther Nyally

"Being part of this fellowship was like a wonderful dream and surprise. As one of the youngest feminists and the only female in my organisation in Ghana, the learnings I've gained here will inform my work. I plan to educate my boss using the knowledge I've acquired."
- Xtrim

"This space has challenged me in ways I've never experienced before. It has encouraged me to reflect on language justice, my position in my feminist journey, and what I hope to learn. I'm grateful for the opportunity."
- Victoria Ballah

"Adding too much complex jargon when applying for feminist opportunities used to deter me, but this fellowship proved I could thrive by being myself. This being my first time leaving the country, I had worries, but the fellowship has exceeded my expectations and changed my perceptions, especially regarding trans rights. I hope to explore more on sex worker rights."
- Anita-Queen Ibe

"I appreciated that the application process was not tedious and didn't require writing too much. It was refreshing to focus on the quality rather than the quantity of what we wrote."
- Mary Mam Degen Fye

"Approaching 31, I was sceptical about getting the fellowship, but its inclusivity stood out. I'm interested in reaching out to those resistant to minority rights and fostering continued community."
- Luna Kiazolu

"I never realised the power of intentionality with language and community engagement until this fellowship. It's taught me that every word we use carries weight and can either unite or divide. I'm committed to using my words to build bridges and create spaces of understanding."
- Rose Klu

"Collective care and radical rest have become my guiding principles. This fellowship has shown me the transformative impact of nurturing ourselves and each other. I've learned that true activism requires us to prioritise our well-being and find strength in our vulnerabilities."
- Melvina N'yillah Conton

"The depth of African feminism research I've delved into during this journey has been eye-opening. Learning about our rich history of resistance and resilience has ignited a fire within me to continue my activism with a profound sense of purpose and knowledge."
- Mariama EF Jarju

"I have learned the importance of listening to affected communities and decentring myself in these situations. This fellowship has taught me the importance of amplifying voices that are often silenced, and I'm committed to being an ally and advocate for those who have been marginalised."
- Fatoumata Sanneh

"Exploring queer history in Africa and centring our history in my work has been a revelation. I've realised the importance of honouring our diverse identities and experiences, and I'm determined to create inclusive spaces where everyone's stories are celebrated and valued."
- Kim Ibex

5. What Next & Resources

Yemoja Feminista Fellows continue to be immersed in a series of virtual workshops, employing critical consciousness and interrogating their identities as young African feminists. They will continue to learn, unlearn, and relearn ideologies and frameworks that will contribute to shaping and documenting our collective knowledge of, and involvement in, the African feminist movement.
As organisations, as partners and as individuals, we are on a journey of unlearning and learning - we're evolving how we work and who we are to be stronger allies. We will continue to build the skills and knowledge from the Fellowship with our people and partners, committed to the principle of intersectionality that is essential to this work and central to our collective liberation.
We invite you to explore this journey further and delve into the resources below, curated as part of the Yemoja experience.

Resources

Reading List

- The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity & Love - bell hooks
- The Body Keeps the Score - Bessel Van der Kolk
- Decolonization-and-Afro-Feminism - Sylvia Tamale
- Rising Strong - Brené Brown
- Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the crossroads of liberation, collective care and safety - Cara Page and Erica Woodland

Journal Articles/Writings/Reports

- The healing matrix of African women-led mental health and emotional wellbeing - Dr Toyin Ajao
- Stories of Feminist Mobilisation: How to Advance Feminist Movements Worldwide
- Religious Fundamentalism and Historical Analysis of Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities in Nigeria
- An African Feminist Exploration of Healing Justice
- Climate Change is a sexual and reproductive health and rights issue
- Breaking Down Gender Biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality

Relevant Films

- The Family (2019) - An enigmatic conservative Christian group known as the Family wields enormous influence in Washington, D.C., in pursuit of its global ambitions. Director Jesse Moss
- African Queens: Njinga (2023) - Executive produced and narrated by Jada Pinkett Smith, this docu-series about warrior Queen Njinga of Angola features expert interviews and reenactments of some of Africa's most fascinating rulers.
- History of Swear Words (2021) - Nicolas Cage hosts this proudly profane, funny and engagingly educational series about the history and impact of the most notorious English swear words.

6. Acknowledgements

Authors
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Endnotes
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p12 https://www.criaw-icref.ca/our-work/feminist-intersectionality-and-gba/

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