

(Re)constructing positive cultures to protect girls and women against sexual violence

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abstract

The issue of addressing gendered sexual violence in Africa has been a major concern for gender activists and feminists alike. Cultures have, and continue to be cited as major impediments in addressing violence against girls and women. This article is motivated by concerns about the Othering and construction of African cultures as violent, backward, racialised and more patriarchal in opposition to the West. This perspective, entrenched in mainstream human rights discourse, informs many gender-based violence interventions. While I demonstrate in the article how 'culture' is invoked in ways which perpetuate violence against girls and young women in Africa, I argue that this should not be the only way of interpreting 'culture'. Drawing on various studies that centre on culture, I also demonstrate that African cultures in their entirety are not inherently opposed to the fight against gender-based violence. Cognisant of the fact that cultures cannot simply be dismissed, I conclude that, in developing interventions to deal with violence against girls and women, activists can draw from those positive aspects of African cultures while continuing to challenge those versions of 'culture' that undermine the rights of girls and women.

keywords

African cultures, gender-based violence, women, interventions, discourse

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV), which broadly describes violence against girls and women that takes the form of forced and child marriages, wife battering, rape, sexual harassment, and harmful cultural practices continue to escalate in Africa. South Africa, for example, is reported to have the highest rates of rape globally (Anguita, 2012), while Kenya is said to have high rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced child marriages (Plummer and Njuguna, 2009). This is despite the existence of strong advocacy campaigns by activists that have culminated into rights-based legal reforms instituted to protect girls and women against violence. Writers like

Bunting (1993), Bennet (2005), Holomisa (2005) and Plummer and Njuguna (2009) have however argued that concentrating on legal reforms alone while marginalising indigenous cultural discourse and expertise might render such strategies ineffective in attempts to eliminate violence against women and girls within African contexts. Yet there are those who maintain that 'culture' perpetuates violence against girls and women in Africa (Anguita, 2012). I argue that a one-sided negative construction of African cultures can be counterproductive as it obscures the liberating potential of 'culture'. In this article, I attempt to demonstrate how 'culture' can be drawn upon in non-sexist ways to address GBV.

Methodology

Drawing on critical readings on culture, and African feminism, I first map out the theoretical debates around the concepts of 'culture', and African feminism in relation to violence against girls and women in Africa, and how I position myself within these debates. Secondly, I examine how 'culture' and cultural practices are invoked in various African contexts in ways that promote GBV by making reference to both academic research articles, newspaper reports, and discussion papers focusing on culture and GBV in postcolonial Africa. Next, I offer some insights about how 'culture' can be used as a resource in feminist struggles against GBV in Africa, again drawing on researchers who have studied culture, cultural practices, and GBV in African countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. I conclude by discussing two interventions in Kenya and Zimbabwe, which are engaging with men and boys to eliminate GBV.

'culture' was an "instrument of resistance"

Redefining 'culture'

'Culture' is often used in Africa in ways which construct it as being central to the formation of identities (Amadiume, 2006). Mugambe (2006) and Wadesango *et al* (2011) have defined 'culture' in terms of shared practices, traditions, norms, and values unique to particular social groups. However, one limitation with this definition is that it paints a social realist understanding of 'culture' as something fixed, consensually shared, and homogeneous, instead of it being plural, and contested. Thus, what counts as 'culture' or 'African culture' in postcolonial Africa should not be taken for granted, considering how some old traditions, norms and values have either been totally discarded, renegotiated, or reinterpreted to be meaningful in the lives of the younger generations (Wilson-Targoe, 2007; Boonzaier and Spiegel, 2008; Epprecht, 2013). The position taken in this article is that 'culture' needs not be taken as an essence, but rather as a social construction that often takes the form of discourse(s). In light of this, I adopt one of the definitions offered by Raymond Williams in Garuba and Radithlalo (2008:37) that "culture is a set of practices by which meanings are produced and exchanged within a group" which foregrounds people's agency in historical and

present conceptualisations of 'culture'. Tamale (2008:51) for example points out that what people presently understand as 'African culture', "is largely a product of constructions and (re)interpretations by former colonial authorities in collaboration with African male patriarchs". Which is why Garuba and Radithlalo (2008) trace the current theorisation of 'culture' in Africa to the history of colonialism where nationalist constructions of a unified African nationalism and 'culture' were strategically produced to challenge colonial domination.

Consequently, in this article, the focus is more on what various people (can) do with 'culture', and less about what culture is. How and when is 'culture' spoken about, by whom and for what ends in the context of GBV? Rob Pattman (2001) writes about his surprise coming across discourses about 'culture' in Zimbabwe in the 1990s in which 'culture' was animated, and spoken about like a powerful person with a voice. He says people spoke about 'culture' in terms of what 'culture' proclaims or says, and it seemed to be used in a way which connected it to 'tradition' or the idealisation of a pre-colonial past which produced a sense of common identity. He interpreted this construction of 'culture' as anti-colonial discourse promoted by intellectuals like Frantz Fanon. For Fanon (1990) and other nationalist thinkers, 'culture' was an "instrument of resistance" (Garuba and Radithlalo, 2008:39) and continues to be employed as such in postcolonial contexts essentially to challenge western imperialist discourses that continue to frame African cultures as inferior and backward.

African feminisms' engagement with culture and gender-based violence

One of the problems with this idealisation of 'culture' in anti-colonial discourses is how this operates through idealisation of African femininity and denigration of African women who fail to live up to the role bestowed on them as exemplars of 'culture'. This critique has emerged largely from African feminists who have labelled these nationalist constructions of 'culture' as masculinist. Nana Wilson-Targoe (2007), for example, critiques the work of Fanon for not paying attention to the gendered constructions of 'culture'.

However, African feminism has been varied in its engagement with 'culture' and GBV, hence the need to speak of African feminisms in the plural. The heterogeneity of African feminisms stems from the fact that African feminists draw on different global feminist perspectives, informed by aspects such as culture, sexuality, class, and race. By African feminisms, I refer generally to the forms of African women's activism seeking to liberate African women from all forms of gender oppression. There are those African feminists, such as Sylvia Tamale (2008) and Ifi Amadiume (2006), who draw on postcolonial theory by challenging cultural imperialism while insisting that the issue of race be included within feminist analyses. These have challenged the dominant western constructions of all African cultures and traditions as essentially oppressive to African women. While not condoning harmful practices such as FGM, Tamale has been quite vocal in challenging the 'harmful practices' and 'mutilation' labels attached to cultural practices, for example, labia elongation, which she argues actually enhance rather than suppress female sexuality. Similarly, authors such as Bowman (2003) have questioned why cultural and 'culture of violence' explanations of gender-based violence are invoked only in the context of African populations, yet domestic and sexual violence are also rampant even in the West. This version of African feminism seems to draw from the work by Edward Said (1978) who draws our attention to the ways in which 'culture' is often associated with tradition and exoticism and imputed to the Other through various cultural practices normalising western cultural practices which in turn reproduces race and power relations.

Then there are other African feminists such as Stella Nyanzi (2013) and Desiree Lewis (2005) who have rallied against the way 'culture' is used to promote violence against black people whose sexual identities do not conform to the idealised heteronormative constructions of African identities. African feminists and activists have therefore played a critical role in successfully advocating for legal provisions seeking to protect girls, women and sexual minorities against GBV. However, their initial lobbying efforts focused more on women than girl victims (Posel, 2005) despite the latter being more vulnerable to 'cultural' violence as I will

elaborate below. Another contentious debate within feminist approaches to eliminating violence against girls and women, has been about whether or not to engage men (as 'spokesmen of culture' and potential perpetrators of GBV) in GBV interventions. In the context of this article, I take a pluralist position in challenging violence against girls and women, as I believe that there are important gains realised in each of these various African feminist perspectives. While in part, I hold the view that legislation sensitive to girls and women's rights is a critical strategy for punishing GBV offenders, in this article I attempt to make a case for 'culture' as a complementary narrative that might be more effective in preventing GBV. Consequently, I buy into Tamale's (2008:65) declaration that African feminists "must not be shy to be heard speaking out in support of culture", although I argue that this must be done in critical terms, lest we slip back into deifying culture through cultural relativism.

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'Culture' used as defence for male violence

As I demonstrate in this section, 'culture' is a (discursive or materialist) resource that is not homogeneously beneficial to children, women, and men of any particular cultural group. From a Foucauldian perspective, Morrissey (2013:79) convincingly argues that "discourse has material consequences", and as such dominant circulating discourses on 'culture' have the capacity to produce attitudes that promote GBV. Authors like Robins (2008) and Pattman (2001) have written about how discourses of 'culture' (embedded in anti-apartheid and anti-colonial discourses) connected with assertions of masculinity are invoked by some South African and Zimbabwean men respectively to perpetrate violence against women. Reflecting on his teaching experience at a certain teachers' college in Zimbabwe in the early 1990s, Pattman reports how female students who wore trousers, were victims of sexual harassment by fellow male students for adopting 'western' forms of dressing which was seen as abandoning 'African culture'.

More than a decade later, there are media reports in Zimbabwe of women wearing mini-skirts who have been sexually harassed. In response, Katswe Sisterhood, a women rights activist group in Zimbabwe organised a historic 'mini-skirt march' which took place in October 2014 to protest against male touts operating at taxi ranks who harass and even strip women wearing mini-skirts. The march immediately became the centre of debate in mainstream media (see 'Mixed reactions to mini-skirt march', *News Day*, 6 October 2014). Similar protests were staged in Kenya a month later with women rights advocates calling for the respect of women's rights to choose what they want to wear. It is interesting how 'culture' was appropriated (especially by men and even some women), in castigating this march as a non-event that sought to undermine 'our culture'. Most comments made by the public in response to the media reports spoke of mini-skirts as unacceptable in the 'African culture', while the women who participated in the march were condemned for 'copying' western forms of dressing. Two months after the march, another young woman was again stripped by taxi rank touts in Harare, this time leading to the arrest of two of the touts (see 'Net closes in on mini-skirt touts', *The Herald*, 23 December 2014). What is perhaps particularly disturbing is the way some seem to sanction the sexual harassment of women wearing mini-skirts as deserved punishment for their 'violation' of 'African culture'. These marches, while sending a message about the need to respect women's bodies and rights, may be ineffective in countering these androcentric cultural discourses considering the backlash against gender activists who are often constructed as driven by a western agenda.

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However, claims that mini-skirts are unacceptable in the African culture are open to contestation, as are claims that same-sex relationships are 'un-African'. This is precisely because there is evidence showing that 'mini-skirts' were worn in precolonial Africa (see Mavhunga, 2014), just as same-sex unions

were also present in pre-colonial Africa (see Epprecht, 2013; Nyanzi, 2013). It would thus not be far-fetched to say that those who invoke the wearing of short skirts and homosexuality as 'un-African', base their arguments on distorted colonial, nationalist and male-centred constructions of African culture which seek to police women and their sexuality. Sadly, these dominantly gendered, yet heteronormative constructions of 'culture', have subsequently resulted in homophobic discourses and practices in many African countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda where homosexuality remains criminalised. Even in South Africa with a more liberal Constitution that recognises the rights of gays and lesbians, homosexual communities cannot freely express their sexualities. Anguita (2012) and Morrissey (2013) write about 'corrective rapes' in South Africa in reference to sexual violence against those who do not conform to normative sexual identities. They argue that 'corrective rapes' mainly target black South African lesbians for not conforming to the idealised constructions of African femininity, and some men believe that by raping lesbians they can 'cure' them of this 'un-African' sexual identity. Rape therefore becomes a way in which "men exert control over women" (Osirim, 2003:2).

Robins (2008) and Palitza (2006) have written about how the South African high court acquitted Jacob Zuma (the current South African President) of a rape charge in 2006 after he succeeded in convincing the court that what he did was in harmony with Zulu culture and thus did not constitute rape. Zuma is quoted as saying that in the context of Zulu culture, "leaving a woman in that state [[of sexual arousal]] was the worst thing a man could do" adding that "she could even have you arrested and charged with rape" (Robins, 2008:198). Palitza (2006) rightly interprets Zuma's cultural defence as an example of how culture is abused, and indeed problematises the whole notion of 'culture' as a constitutional right, if it is to violate women's rights. As Dr Mongezi Guma, the Chairperson of the South African Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities remarked, "culture must not be used as a traditional weapon with which to beat others" (Potgieter, 2005:158).

Gendered cultural practices

As African countries continue to grapple with the HIV/AIDS scourge, 'culture' is presently at the centre of moral debates in postcolonial Africa. In South Africa for example, traditionalists and other political figures have claimed that HIV/AIDS is punishment to Africans for abandoning their 'culture' (Kaarsholm, 2006). This moral panic has led to the revival of some traditional practices, notably virginity testing ceremonies in countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and Malawi (Kaarsholm, 2006; Wadesango *et al.* 2011). The 'traditionalists' who support virginity testing see it as an HIV prevention measure as well as a strategy for identifying cases of child sexual abuse, while women rights activists see it as a gendered practice that regulates the sexuality of young girls, considering that boys are not subjected to such tests (Wadesango *et al.* 2011). Additionally, in the context of a prevailing belief that having sex with a virgin cures HIV/AIDS (Osirim, 2003; Posel, 2005; Plummer and Njuguna, 2009), virginity tests further expose young girls to sexual abuse and HIV transmission primarily because of their perceived "moral purity and sexual innocence" (Posel, 2005:245). What is more worrying is that some of these girl-child sexual abuse cases occur and remain concealed within families under the "cultural logics of secrecy" (Posel, 2005:242), implying that violated girls continue to suffer in silence.

Another revived cultural practice, which again affects young girls, is *ukuthwala*. According to a 2014 discussion paper by the South African Law Reform Commission (SALRC), *ukuthwala* is a Zulu cultural practice of carrying off a girl for the purpose of marriage and is said to be rife in the Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa (SALRC, 2014). Others like Wadesango *et al.* (2011:123) have described this practice as "marriage by abduction". While 'abduction' denotes coercion as is evident in the contemporary context, traditionally *ukuthwala* occurred with the girl's consent to:

"circumvent an arranged marriage; circumvent parental opposition to the match; fast-track marriage negotiations when the girl is pregnant; and to force the hands of the parents if the prospective husband is too poor to pay *lobolo* [bride price]" (SALRC, 2014:7).

However, in recent years, this practice has received condemnation especially from women rights activists for fuelling child rape, and child marriages after it emerged that young girls between 11 and 15 years are the main victims who are married off to older men, some of whom are HIV positive. Thus *ukuthwala* represents yet another gendered cultural practice that benefit men's interests particularly when done without the girl/woman's consent.

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These examples firstly show how gender and culture intersects with age, rendering girls powerless victims of GBV because children (especially girls) are at the bottom of the gender hierarchy due to their gender and age. Most of these cultural practices are seen as a means by which men control women, and elders control the young (Wadesango *et al.* 2011). Thus, it is often the parents and guardians who sanction these early forced marriages, virginity tests, *ukuthwala*, and FGM (Wadesango *et al.* 2011), denying girls the right to freely choose whether or not to participate in these practices. Secondly, these examples raise debates about the contradictions that exist between cultural rights and other broader universal human rights. In the context of South Africa where individual human rights are juxtaposed with collective cultural rights in the same Constitution, 'culture' becomes an area of intense contestation. Section 31 of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) grants people from diverse cultural groups "the right to enjoy their culture and the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice", but it is unclear on whether "other rights supersede cultural rights" (SALRC, 2014:14). This creates loopholes that unfortunately can be manipulated by some individuals to perpetrate violence against girls and women in the name of enjoying their 'cultural rights'. SALRC concludes that, where young girls below 18 years are concerned, *ukuthwala* is on the one hand a cultural right, and a criminal act on the other. This is in light of the South African constitutional provisions which criminalise not only child and forced marriages, but even virginity testing for girls under 16 years of age. Even if the courts are (or should be) open to respecting cultural rights, these should be

contested the moment they are used as defence for GBV, as witnessed in the Zuma case. The violent versions of *ukuthwala* need to be condemned, but there is need to also read it as a potentially liberating custom which provides avenues and agency for consenting older girls to marry spouses of their choice. Against this background, it might be disempowering when gender activists call for the total abandonment of cultural practices such as *ukuthwala*.

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Another African practice that has been condemned by some women rights activists is the payment of *lobolo*. Wadesango *et al.* (2011) criticise this custom for reducing women to commodities thus subjecting married women to violence and torture by their husbands. This viewpoint has however met its own criticism from authors like Holomisa (2005) and Osirim (2003) who have argued that some men even beat their girlfriends whom they have not paid *lobolo* for, suggesting other underlying reasons behind violence against women that are entrenched in patriarchal ideals. While this custom has undoubtedly become commercialised in most of the postcolonial African societies, traditionally *lobolo* was to value rather than devalue a woman and to cement relationships between the marrying families (Holomisa, 2005). It is this discourse that stresses the significance of *lobolo* as a custom that values rather than undermines women's dignity, which needs to be promoted.

Reinterpreting African cultural systems as alternative narratives

While I have demonstrated that some cultural ideologies and practices expose girls and women to GBV, I contend that not all African cultures undermine the rights of girls and women. In South Africa for example, Boonzaier and Spiegel (2008 citing Webster, 1991) cite research which depicts Thonga culture as being more sensitive to the rights and dignity of women in that, it does not condone the maltreatment of Thonga women by their husbands. This, according to Boonzaier and Spiegel, stands in contrast with Zulu culture

often associated with male domination and violence, which has resulted in Thonga women wanting to affirm their Thonga identities, while Thonga men prefer taking up Zulu identities in an attempt to assert their male authority.

In addition, studies have shown that traditional mechanisms existed to prevent GBV in African communities. Plummer and Njuguna (2009:528) who conducted research on child sexual abuse in Kenya, found that among the Luo ethnic group of Kenya, there existed certain sex taboos which sought to protect children, for example "the threat of death if one had sexual relations with a child". In addition, those found guilty of child rape and other sexual offences would be heavily fined and ostracised. These findings are similar to those by Jewkes *et al* (2005:1816) where study participants claimed that within the Namibian cultural context, rape is considered "unacceptable" while child rapists are considered social outcasts.

Cultural justice systems also existed to prevent domestic violence, for example in Zimbabwe where wife beaters in the Shona culture were traditionally required through customary courts to apologise and heavily compensate their wives (Southern Africa Research and Development-Women in Development Southern Africa Awareness [SARDC-WIDSAA], 2000; Osirim, 2003). Yet despite these indications that Shona customary law does not condone wife beating, many Shona men still hold the opinion that wife beating is acceptable within Shona customs (Osirim, 2003).

Customary courts remain very important justice institutions for African rural communities (Weeks, 2011), which has resulted in calls to restore and affirm the role of these courts in postcolonial Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa, this has culminated in the drafting of the now heavily contested Traditional Courts Bill which seeks to regulate customary courts so that they operate in line with the Constitution (Weeks, 2011). Unfortunately, in its current form, the Bill reaffirms the patriarchal nature of customary courts thus rendering them weak in addressing crimes such as GBV against women and children (Gasa, 2011). In most cases, "women are not allowed to appear before or address customary courts directly" without a male representative (Weeks, 2011:8) which reduces their status to that of legal minors as was the case during colonialism and

apartheid. As a result, there have been recommendations by women rights activists to exclude crimes such as rape, child abuse, domestic violence, and incest from the jurisdiction of customary courts. Gasa (2011:28) recommends that these crimes should instead be handled by conventional courts which seem to offer “women better access to justice”. However, stripping customary courts of the authority to handle these crimes poses another challenge because conventional courts are in themselves very expensive and inaccessible to the majority of rural women and girls. In light of this, attention must be drawn to finding ways of ensuring that customary courts become gender sensitive and that traditional leaders do not abuse power when they preside over customary courts.

Culture as a resource for gender-based violence interventions

Holomisa (2005:49) points to ‘culture’ as a resource that can complement the existing conventional laws through promoting “humane and communal values inherent in African cultures and customs” some of which include *Ubuntu* (translated as humanity and ‘I am what I am because of who we all are’) an ethos argued by (Mangena, 2012) to be inherent in African cultures depicting reason and compassion for others. I argue that gender activists and feminists need to capitalise on these, since adopting models of GBV interventions informed solely by the universalistic human rights discourse while marginalising cultural justice systems, creates a false dichotomy that does not recognise people’s “diverse and situated forms of belonging” (Robins, 2008:197). If African women rights activists do not pay attention to this, they risk designing interventions that are “impoverished and strategically weak” (Bunting, 1993:6), more so in essentially collectivist societies of Africa where community goals come before individual goals (Plummer and Njuguna, 2009; Mangena, 2012). In advocating for gender justice in Africa, practitioners working in these cultural contexts need to realise what Tamale (2008:48) called “the emancipatory potential of culture” (see also Mugambe, 2006).

What might be more effective in the long run is changing men’s patriarchal attitudes (Wood and Jewkes, 1997) by challenging how they appeal to ‘culture’ only when they

violate girls and women. One way of changing attitudes will stem from constructing a counter-cultural discourse that is non-sexist because as Morrissey (2013:82) observes, “language is an important tool in the fight for social justice”. Just as prevailing masculinist-cultural discourses have promoted GBV, we should begin to see the possibility of doing away with those gendered versions of ‘culture’ and customary law that subject girls and women to violence through (re)creating empowering discourses of ‘culture’ from those previously suppressed egalitarian traditional values and systems within African cultures. ‘Culture’, either in its discursive or materialist form, should be seen as “a double-edged sword that can be wielded creatively and resourcefully to enhance women’s access to justice” (Tamale, 2008:64).

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Interventions engaging with men as ‘custodians’ of culture

It would be a gross misrepresentation to suggest that all organisations fighting against GBV have completely marginalised traditional leaders and men in their programming. Indeed some have engaged with these ‘custodians of culture’, for example the Coexist Initiative, a men’s organisation in Kenya formed in 2002 to complement women organisations’ efforts to prevent GBV. According to Coexist’s founder Wanjala Wafula (2013:163), they realised that most men and boys continue to perpetuate cultural discourses that violate the rights of women and girls, and as such their programming targets men and boys “in building a culture of respect for the rights of girls and women”. The organisation works closely with traditional leaders whose authority has the capacity to instil norms and values that may decrease the tolerance of GBV in their respective communities. Through their ‘Changed Men Initiative’ in the Maasai Moran community, Coexist engaged with community leaders to prevent harmful cultural practices, notably FGM and child marriages and report that in 2012, as many as 10 000 boys and men in this community “rejected FGM as a practice that disempowers girls” (Wafula, 2013:164).

In Zimbabwe, the Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS) (2011) identified the 'Changing the River's Flow Programme' as one of the best local practices that challenge gender dynamics in cultural contexts. The initiative is jointly implemented by the Women Action Group (WAG) – a women's organisation founded in 1983 – and Padare/Enkundleni – a men's organisation founded in 1995 to promote gender justice and equality. Through the programme, both organisations focus on training traditional leaders in order to:

"equip [them] with the skills to address GBV cases in their communities and cases of harmful practices that fuel the spread of HIV" (SAfAIDS, 2011:10).

Undoubtedly, these programmes are commendable for their engagement with traditional leaders because of the authority and respect they command in their areas of jurisdiction. I believe that the effectiveness of such programmes could be enhanced if women's rights practitioners begin to regard these traditional leaders as cultural resources and experts in their own right, therefore also learning from them about the positive cultural values and systems traditionally used to address GBV. Furthermore, such cultural expertise should not be confined to interventions targeting rural communities, for this creates a false rural-urban dichotomy that portrays the urban populations as not benefiting from cultural solutions. As rightly noted by Mugambe (2006), within African contexts, issues of 'culture' relate to all (although in varying levels) regardless of class, level of education, or geographical location.

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While I argue for this discursive shift to accommodate the potential in some of the cultural discourse, I am also cognisant of the critique levelled against discourse theorists such as Foucault for being overly preoccupied with discourse analysis, thus reducing people to pawns of discourses. Within the context of attempting to promote gender justice, focus on discursive formations alone which do not translate to practical interventions is not useful. Consequently, I advocate here for what Escobar (1995:11) calls "the deployment of the discourse through practices".

Interventions targeted at ending GBV in Africa need to feed from these complex and conflicting cultural discourses, beginning "with an appraisal from within a culture, including an evaluation of strength of the cultural mores" (Plummer and Njuguna, 2009:529). It is however, not enough for 'custodians' of culture such as Holomisa (2005:49) to declare that "African culture does not sanction or condone the current scourge of women and child abuse", when cases of GBV committed in the name of 'culture' continue to escalate. Traditional leaders will thus need to be held accountable such that their discursive positions translate into action to a point when communities and customary courts will collectively protect girls and women from gender-based violence.

Conclusion

When African gender activists continue to perpetuate the colonial and western discourses that position African cultures as backward and impediments to women realising gender justice, they ultimately ignore the liberating potential of African cultures in addressing GBV. While I have demonstrated that indeed there are cultural practices that expose girls and women to violence, I have equally also shown that this does not paint a holistic and complex picture of the myriad constructions of African cultures. As such, there is also need for more African feminists' engagement with research and GBV programmes that centre on the non-harmful constructions of cultural norms, values, and customs. This, in my view, will aid in creating alternative positive discourses of 'culture', rather than dismissing cultures as sanctioning violence against women in their entirety. With this, activists can design interventions that marry the local with the international. Preventive interventions that are context specific and sensitive to emancipatory cultural norms and principles can go a long way in preventing violence against girls and women in Africa. Let not 'culture' remain a "neglected pathway to women's justice" (Tamale, 2008:55).

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