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Feminism, Colonialism, and the African Woman: Reclaiming Agency in International Relations

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Abstract: International Relations as a discipline has long privileged Eurocentric and masculinist frameworks that obscure the historical and contemporary contributions of African women. This paper interrogates those exclusions through the lens of Postcolonial Feminist Theory, repositioning African women not as peripheral figures but as central agents in global political life. It traces their roles across precolonial governance systems, anti-colonial struggles, liberation wars, and contemporary peacebuilding, showing how their practices of resistance, care, and leadership unsettle dominant paradigms of power, security, and agency. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative interpretivist approach grounded in textual analysis and African feminist scholarship, enabling a reconstruction of marginalized voices, indigenous epistemologies, and suppressed histories. The analysis demonstrates that reclaiming African women's agency is not about assimilation into existing frameworks but about transforming the logics that render them invisible and subordinate. African feminist thought thus offers alternative imaginaries of politics rooted in relationality, communal resilience, restorative justice, and epistemic justice. By centering these perspectives, the paper contributes to rethinking IR beyond its colonial legacies and toward a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable discipline. The findings affirm that any genuine project of global transformation must take seriously African women's voices as vital sites of knowledge, resistance, and power.

Keywords: African Feminism, Agency, Epistemic Justice, International Relations, Peacebuilding, Postcolonial Feminism, Power

Introduction

Calls for inclusivity, justice, and equal representation increasingly shape the global academic and political landscape. Nowhere is this more evident than in the growing feminist interrogation of international relations and security studies—disciplines historically dominated by realist, state-centric, and masculinist paradigms (Tickner & True, 2018; Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). Although feminism as a scholarly and political project originated in the global North, its resonance and adaptations within the African context have produced a distinct body of thought that centers the agency of African women within precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial realities (Sakue, 2017; Haliso & Falola, 2019).

In precolonial Africa, the socio-political and economic terrain was neither monolithically patriarchal nor devoid of female leadership (Adepong, 2015). Historical evidence abounds of women in commanding political and spiritual roles, from Queen Amina of Zazzau and Empress Taytu Betul of Ethiopia to priestesses and market queens who wielded significant influence (Tripp, 2017; Malowa, 2024). These realities contradict Western narratives that assume patriarchy as a timeless and universal African norm. Rather, as

scholars have argued, it was the advent of colonialism—with its imposition of Eurocentric, capitalist, and Westphalian state structures—that reorganized gender relations, entrenching masculine domination and relegating women to the margins of political life (Amadiume, 2015; Parashar, 2016; Bertolt, 2018).

Feminism in Africa thus emerges not simply as a mirror of Western feminist struggles but as a critical response to both colonial legacies and postcolonial state formations that continue to exclude and undermine women (Sakue, 2017). It interrogates how international relations, as a discipline, has failed to reckon with the gendered violence of colonialism, the erasure of women's political labor, and the ongoing systemic marginalization of African women in peacebuilding, governance, and security institutions (Donald et al., 2020; Nortvedt, 2021).

This paper argues that rethinking international relations and African statehood through feminist lenses not only recovers the lost histories and contributions of African women but also reveals the inadequacies of masculinist frameworks in explaining the continent's crises and potentials. Drawing on African feminist scholarship, historical examples, and critical theoretical interventions, the

paper reclaims the centrality of African women's agency in shaping the trajectory of political power, conflict, and governance on the continent. In doing so, it challenges the gendered silences of both Western and African academic traditions and calls for a more inclusive and accurate understanding of power and politics in Africa.

Statement of the Problem

International Relations (IR) as a discipline has historically privileged state-centric, militarized, and patriarchal narratives that marginalize non-Western voices and gendered experiences (Blanchard & Lin, 2016). While feminist scholarship has challenged some of these limitations, much of the foundational literature continues to reflect masculinist assumptions that position men as primary actors and render women either invisible or passive (Knop, 2017; Hooper, 2019). Feminist IR has made notable strides in interrogating power relations and gender hierarchies in global politics, yet its theoretical scope often centers on Western frameworks, leaving the agency, histories, and lived realities of African women either marginally acknowledged or entirely excluded (Yacob-Haliso & Falola, 2019; Akinbobola, 2020).

In the African context, this epistemic exclusion is compounded by colonial legacies that disrupted precolonial gender dynamics in which African women held significant spiritual,

political, and economic roles (Amadiume, 2015; Adjepong, 2015). The colonial state institutionalized Western patriarchal norms, relegating women to the domestic sphere and undermining their participation in governance and public life (Chuku, 2018; Pailey, 2019). Even in anti-colonial struggles and contemporary conflict settings, African women have been central to resistance movements and peacebuilding processes, yet these contributions are often underreported or misrepresented in IR literature and policy documents (Parpart, 2019; Adebajo, 2021). Consequently, mainstream scholarship continues to reproduce gender-blind accounts of African political development, security, and agency (Yacob & Falola, 2021).

This study seeks to confront this scholarly gap by foregrounding African women's historical and contemporary roles in shaping statehood, resisting oppression, and contributing to peace and governance across the continent. It argues that the marginalization of African women in international relations reflects a broader crisis of representation that distorts the realities of global politics. By integrating African feminist perspectives and centering indigenous histories, this work contributes to a more inclusive and contextually grounded feminist IR framework—one that not only recovers silenced voices but also challenges the normative foundations of the discipline itself.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the historical marginalization of African women in international relations and statecraft requires engaging with theoretical perspectives that foreground their agency, resistance, and lived experiences. This study adopts Postcolonial Feminist Theory as its primary analytical lens. Emerging in the late twentieth century, postcolonial feminism critiques the universalizing tendencies of Western feminist scholarship, which has often constructed women in the Global South as passive, voiceless, and homogenous subjects. As Mohanty (1984) famously argued in her essay "Under Western Eyes," Western discourses frequently erase historical and cultural specificity, portraying "Third World women" as a singular, oppressed category devoid of agency (Woodson, 2020; Al-Wazedi, 2020). Postcolonial feminist theory thus serves as a powerful framework for interrogating how global systems of gender, race, colonialism, and capitalism intersect to marginalize non-Western women. In the African context, it sheds light on how colonial administrations imposed rigid patriarchal structures that redefined gender relations and displaced women from roles of political, economic, and spiritual authority they previously held in precolonial societies (Parpart, 2019; Nkenkana, 2015). The restructuring of legal, political, and social institutions during the colonial period institutionalized a masculinist model of governance, silencing African women's historical

contributions to leadership, diplomacy, and resistance movements (Al-wazedi, 2020). Postcolonial feminism, therefore, enables a recovery of those erased narratives and positions African women not merely as victims, but as historical agents embedded in complex power structures.

While postcolonial feminism offers an essential corrective to Eurocentric and masculinist paradigms in international relations, it is not without limitations. Scholars such as Manning (2016) and Piedalue and Rishi (2017) caution that postcolonial feminist theory, despite its critique of Western feminism, often remains tethered to Euro-American academic frameworks. As a result, it may inadequately reflect the ontologies, languages, and epistemologies of African women themselves. Roberts and Connell (2016) further argue that postcolonial feminism risks replicating the very forms of exclusion it seeks to challenge if it does not sufficiently engage with localized knowledge. In light of these critiques, this paper remains attentive to African feminist voices and intellectual traditions that enrich the postcolonial feminist framework from within, offering a more grounded, culturally attuned understanding of African women's role in shaping international relations and statecraft.

Situating African Women in Precolonial and Colonial Contexts

Across Africa's long and complex history, women have occupied significant and multifaceted roles in the social, economic, political, and

spiritual domains. In many precolonial societies, gender relations were not strictly hierarchical but rather fluid and complementary (Bertolt, 2018). While systems of power existed, they did not uniformly privilege men, and women exercised considerable agency across both public and private spheres (Ngohengo, 2021). Figures such as Queen Amina of Zazzau and Empress Taytu Betul of Ethiopia exemplify women's leadership in statecraft and warfare, while priestesses, market women, and lineage heads played vital roles in religious and economic governance (Wright, 2020). Among groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Akan, dual-sex political systems allowed women to hold parallel authority to men in decision-making institutions (Adjepong, 2015; Parpart, 2019). Additionally, African cosmologies often revered female deities, affirming the legitimacy of feminine power in spiritual and societal life (Razak, 2016).

The onset of European colonialism, however, marked a significant rupture in these indigenous gender systems. Colonial regimes-imposed Eurocentric, Victorian-era patriarchal norms that undermined the egalitarian and complementary gender relations found in many African societies (Bertolt, 2018). The colonial state not only transplanted Western institutions but also introduced rigid gender binaries and hierarchies that were foreign to African worldviews (Yari & Extension, 2024). Colonial policies frequently elevated male authority while erasing or sidelining traditional

female leadership roles, such as the Iyalode among the Yoruba or the Omu among the Igbo (Agbaje, 2019). British indirect rule, in particular, systematically privileged male chiefs and interpreted African societies through patriarchal assumptions, thereby dismantling indigenous structures that had supported women's political participation (Spencer, 2016).

This transformation was not merely ideological but deeply material. Colonial economic systems — geared toward extraction and export — centralized men as intermediaries between local communities and colonial authorities. Land tenure, taxation, and labor systems were restructured in ways that curtailed women's access to economic resources and reinforced male dominance (Byfield, 2018; Parpart, 2019). As Mlotshwa (2021) observes, women were increasingly confined to subsistence agriculture or unpaid domestic work, their labor rendered invisible in colonial economic metrics. Studies by Dell and Olken (2020) further reveal how colonial administrations designed gendered labor hierarchies that maximized male productivity while marginalizing female contributions, thereby entrenching long-term structural inequality.

Despite these structural dislocations, African women mobilized to resist both colonial domination and gender-based exclusion. The 1929 Aba Women's War in southeastern Nigeria stands out as a significant example of women-led resistance,

where thousands of Igbo and Ibibio women protested colonial taxation and administrative abuses (Chuku, 2018; Eferebo, 2024). Such acts of resistance often emerged from within the domestic and communal spaces to which women had been relegated. Using spiritual authority, songs, markets, and kinship networks, women transformed these spaces into sites of political action and defiance (Parpart, 2019; Bouka, 2020).

Women's participation in nationalist struggles further demonstrates their centrality in Africa's political history. Figures like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Nigeria, Albertina Sisulu in South Africa, and Bibi Titi Mohamed in Tanzania were instrumental in the push for independence and civil rights (Bouilly et al., 2016; Nwankwor, 2018). Yet, post-independence historiography often erased or downplayed their contributions, replacing them with masculinized narratives of liberation and state-building (Akukwe, 2024; Yacob-Haliso & Falola, 2017). This selective memory reflects not only a patriarchal bias in political culture but also a failure within international relations and African studies to sufficiently theorize women's historical agency.

To be clear, patriarchy was not absent from precolonial Africa. However, colonialism institutionalized and codified gender subjugation through law, bureaucracy, and political centralization (Agbaje, 2019). It narrowed the acceptable forms of femininity and imposed Western gender norms under the guise of modernization and civilization

(Chuku, 2018). Thus, colonial rule imposed a dual oppression on African women: racial subjugation under European domination and gendered exclusion within the emergent state and economy (Bertolt, 2018).

Situating African women in this historical trajectory challenges assumptions that African societies were uniformly patriarchal or that women were passive recipients of modernity (Nwankwor, 2018; Parpart, 2019). Instead, closer examination through feminist and decolonial frameworks reveals a long-standing tradition of female power, resilience, and resistance (Razak, 2016; Ngohengo, 2021). Feminist scholars argue that the continued marginalization of women in African political discourse is a legacy not of tradition alone, but of colonial gender restructurings that codified patriarchy in law, governance, and culture (Bertolt, 2018; Byfield, 2018; Agbaje, 2019). Understanding this legacy is vital not only for rewriting African historical narratives but also for constructing inclusive futures in which women's contributions to governance, peacebuilding, and social development are recognized as central rather than marginal (Yacob-Haliso & Falola, 2017; Eferebo, 2024).

Feminist Interventions in International Relations

The discipline of International Relations (IR), long dominated by realism, liberalism, and other mainstream paradigms, has historically marginalized gender as an

analytical category (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020). It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that feminist scholars began to meaningfully intervene in IR, challenging its core assumptions and exposing the masculinist biases that underpinned its theories, practices, and institutional frameworks (Rosenje et al., 2022). The feminist turn in IR emerged alongside wider academic and political shifts — including the end of the Cold War — which created an intellectual opening for alternative, critical approaches to global politics (Tickner & True, 2018).

Feminist interventions in IR critique the discipline on both epistemological and ontological grounds. They argue that traditional IR theory privileges the state as the primary actor, overlooks individual and sub-state experiences, and is rooted in gendered assumptions about power, war, and security (Lascuarin & Villafuerte, 2016). As J. Ann Tickner (1992) in her seminal work *Gender in International Relations*, cited in Underwood (2016) explained that realism, which is foundational to IR, constructs an image of politics that is inherently masculine — emphasizing autonomy, rationality, and the pursuit of power — while relegating values associated with femininity, such as care, interdependence, and emotionality, to the margins or the private sphere. This artificial separation, as opined by Rosenje et al. (2022), not only distorts global realities but also erases the lived

experiences of women and other marginalized groups.

In line with the foregoing, a central critique posed by feminist scholars is the persistent invisibility of women in both the study and practice of international relations. Cynthia Enloe's groundbreaking work *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (2000), as reaffirmed in her later writings (Enloe, 2016), illuminates the overlooked yet indispensable roles women play in sustaining the global political economy. From diplomatic spouses and migrant domestic workers to sex workers stationed near military bases and factory laborers in export processing zones, women's labor is not peripheral but rather constitutive of global systems of power and capital (Connell, 2016; Enloe, 2016). By urging scholars to "follow the women," Enloe introduces a methodological shift that redirects attention from elite institutions to the realm of the everyday — emphasizing that international politics is not only shaped by presidents and diplomats, but also by ordinary women whose lives intersect with global structures in intimate and embodied ways (Parashar, 2016; Shepherd, 2017). This reconceptualization exposes the gendered assumptions underpinning mainstream IR and broadens the scope of what counts as political within the international system.

Furthermore, feminist scholars have consistently critiqued the entrenched gendered dichotomies that structure

conventional international relations (IR) theory — binaries such as war/peace, public/private, rational/emotional, and strong/weak. As True and Hewitt (2018) observe, these dichotomies are not neutral descriptions but reflect and reinforce patriarchal logics that marginalize feminine-associated values and experiences. For instance, framing war as masculine and peace as feminine imposes reductive gender scripts that often lead to policies excluding women from security decision-making or essentializing their roles as inherently peaceful (Myrttinen et al., 2017). Scholars such as Kirby and Shepherd (2016) and Krause et al. (2018) contend that such frameworks obscure the diverse ways women engage with violence and peace — not only as victims, but also as combatants, strategists, commanders, peace negotiators, and caretakers in post-conflict societies. In this regard, feminist IR challenges the narrow, state-centric, and masculinist definitions of security, advocating instead for an intersectional and relational understanding of power, agency, and vulnerability (Shepherd, 2018; Wibben, 2020).

Sequentially, the feminist intervention in security studies — a core subfield of international relations — has been particularly transformative. Traditional security paradigms have historically prioritized state survival, military power, and strategic deterrence, often privileging the security of borders

over the security of people (Wibben, 2020). Feminist scholars contest this framework, arguing that it masks the everyday insecurities faced by individuals, particularly women and marginalized populations. From a feminist standpoint, security is not simply defined by the absence of interstate conflict but must also encompass freedom from structural and direct violence — including domestic abuse, sexual violence, economic deprivation, political exclusion, and cultural silencing (True, 2020; Runyan, 2024). This reconceptualization necessitates a paradigm shift in both theory and practice: away from militarized, state-centric models toward human-centered, relational, and inclusive approaches that foreground the lived experiences of individuals (Lascuarin & Villafuerte, 2016).

In doing so, feminist scholars in international relations have also made significant methodological interventions. They advocate for reflexivity, positionality, and the use of qualitative, narrative-based methods — approaches often marginalized within the positivist traditions of mainstream IR for allegedly lacking objectivity or scientific rigor (Johnston, 2022). Feminist scholarship, however, reclaims the legitimacy of embodied knowledge, personal narratives, and lived experiences, arguing that these forms of knowing offer crucial insights into power, identity, and global processes (Barbour, 2017). By challenging the epistemological

dominance of positivism, feminist IR foregrounds the ethical dimensions of knowledge production, questioning not only what is studied but also how and by whom (Prugl & Tickner, 2018). This epistemological repositioning aligns feminist IR with other critical traditions, including postcolonialism and queer theory, in resisting the universalizing claims and exclusionary logics of conventional IR (Thakur, 2021).

Another significant contribution of feminist IR has been the critique of the gendered nature of global governance structures (Holmes et al., 2019). Feminist scholars have demonstrated how major international institutions — including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank — often reproduce masculine norms in both their organizational cultures and policy frameworks (Heinzel et al., 2025). These institutions, while formally committed to gender equality, tend to prioritize neoliberal and militarized logics that sideline the structural dimensions of gender injustice. Even ostensibly progressive measures, such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, have been criticized for instrumentalizing women — positioning them as natural peacemakers, caregivers, or victims — without disrupting the patriarchal foundations of global governance (Jansson & Eduards, 2016; Jorby & Shepherd, 2016). As such, feminist scholars caution against superficial or tokenistic inclusion and instead call

for transformative institutional reform that centers gender justice and redistributes power (Weldon, 2018).

Despite its sustained critiques of mainstream international relations, feminist IR does not reject the discipline wholesale. Rather, it seeks to broaden and deepen it by incorporating marginalized perspectives and rethinking foundational concepts (Prügl & Tickner, 2018). This has given rise to diverse feminist approaches — including liberal feminism, radical feminism, postcolonial feminism, and intersectional feminism — each offering distinct insights into how gender operates in global politics. Postcolonial feminists, for instance, challenge the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism and emphasize the importance of locating women's experiences within specific histories of empire, racial subjugation, and cultural difference (Piedalue & Rishi, 2017). Intersectional feminism, informed by the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), insists that gender cannot be isolated from other axes of power such as race, class, sexuality, and nationality (Dursun, 2022).

These theoretical interventions have not only reshaped academic discourse but also influenced the practice of international politics. Concepts such as “gender mainstreaming,” “feminist foreign policy,” and “gender budgeting” have entered the policy lexicon of international institutions and statecraft (Thompson et al.,

2021). While often unevenly implemented and at times co-opted, these developments reflect a growing acknowledgment that gender matters — not just symbolically, but substantively — in how power is organized, how policies are formulated, and how justice, peace, and development are pursued on a global scale (Pathania, 2017).

Inherently, feminist interventions in international relations represent a paradigmatic shift — not simply an addition of women into existing frameworks, but a fundamental questioning of how the world is ordered, who gets to speak, and whose experiences count (Prügl & Tickner, 2018). Feminist IR insists that the personal is political, the everyday is international, and the gendered is global — highlighting how international politics is deeply embedded in lived experience and power relations (Jansson & Eduards, 2016). By exposing the silences, exclusions, and violences long embedded in IR theory and practice, feminist scholarship does not weaken the discipline; it strengthens it, making IR more inclusive, ethical, and responsive to the complexities of a globalized world (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016).

African Women in War, Conflict, and Peacebuilding

The experiences of African women in war, conflict, and peacebuilding offer a critical lens through which to interrogate the limitations of dominant International Relations (IR) paradigms and to foreground the transformative potential of feminist and decolonial approaches. Contrary to reductive portrayals that cast women solely as passive victims, African women have historically assumed multiple roles — as combatants, community organizers, peace negotiators, caregivers, and survivors (Gbogee, 2016; Oluwaniyi, 2019). These complex roles disrupt rigid binaries between war and peace, public and private, and victimhood and agency, while also revealing the deeply gendered structures that underpin both violence and reconstruction on the continent (Kreft & Schulz, 2022; Agu, 2024). Thus, Duriesmith and Meger (2020) posit that failing to recognize women's agency in these contexts not only distorts historical realities but also reinforces the gendered silences that persist in mainstream IR. The experiences of African women, therefore, necessitate a fundamental reevaluation of IR narratives that have long marginalized or overlooked their contributions to both conflict and peace processes.

In the colonial and early postcolonial eras, African women were not merely passive observers but were deeply embedded in anticolonial resistance movements — not only as caregivers and supporters but also as fighters, mobilizers, and political strategists

(Bouka, 2020). In Algeria's war of independence, for example, women actively joined the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) as militants, nurses, and spies, with their bodies becoming both weapons of resistance and sites of state repression (Mortimer, 2023). Similarly, across Southern Africa — in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa — women participated in liberation struggles, contributing materially, intellectually, and emotionally to nationalist movements, even as they navigated deeply patriarchal organizational cultures (Ndlovu & Twala, 2024). Despite these vital contributions, post-independence African states often sidelined women from formal political power, framing their wartime roles as temporary or exceptional rather than as constitutive of national identity and postcolonial governance (Bauer et al., 2017).

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a proliferation of intrastate conflicts across Africa, including the Rwandan genocide, the Sierra Leonean civil war, and insurgencies in the Lake Chad Basin and the Horn of Africa (Yemane & Borowy, 2023; Birhan, 2024). These conflicts, often described as “new wars,” are marked by fragmented battle lines, the strategic targeting of civilians, identity-driven violence, and the prominent role of non-state actors (Okunlola & Okafor, 2022). Within these volatile landscapes, African women have once again emerged not only as victims but also as

combatants, commanders, and grassroots leaders (Agu, 2024). In the case of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), women's roles defied simple categorization, as many were abducted into rebel forces but later came to wield considerable authority within their ranks (Cullen, 2020). Similarly, within Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), women and girls occupied complex roles that encompassed both coercion and participation, challenging binary moral frameworks of innocence and guilt (Gustavsson et al., 2017).

These examples highlight the limitations of dominant security paradigms, which often portray women primarily as passive victims or objects of humanitarian concern. Feminist scholars have long critiqued such frameworks, arguing that war does not merely victimize women but also reshapes gender roles, expectations, and hierarchies — often in contradictory and context-specific ways (Berry & Lake, 2021). In many post-conflict societies, women often emerge as primary breadwinners and heads of households, assuming economic and social roles that men previously dominated. However, these shifts in gendered responsibilities are rarely institutionalized or sustained in meaningful ways (KC, 2017; Yadav, 2021). Instead, post-conflict reconstruction efforts tend to prioritize the restoration of a masculinist “normalcy” — one that re-centers male authority and reinforces state-centric conceptions of

security, thereby obscuring the everyday insecurities and structural inequalities that continue to shape women's lives (Myrttinen et al., 2017).

Sequentially, peacebuilding processes have often either excluded or tokenized women's participation, despite extensive evidence of their critical roles in sustaining community cohesion, mediating disputes, and delivering essential services during periods of state collapse (Hudson, 2021). The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 marked a watershed moment in recognizing women's agency in peace and security. However, implementation remains uneven, particularly in African contexts where customary norms and elite-driven political settlements frequently sideline grassroots women's organizations (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). Even in Rwanda — often praised for achieving the world's highest proportion of women in parliament following its post-genocide reconstruction — scholars argue that formal political inclusion has not always translated into meaningful shifts in gendered power relations or decision-making authority at the community level (Brown, 2016).

Nonetheless, African women have developed and sustained indigenous strategies of peacebuilding that emphasize reconciliation, social healing, and community resilience (Cocodia, 2023). From the umuganda

(collective labor) tradition in Rwanda to women-led truth-telling ceremonies in Liberia and Sierra Leone, these approaches often center relationality, spirituality, and restorative justice—dimensions frequently marginalized in formal, state-centric peacebuilding models (Issifu, 2015; Gallo & Remsberg, 2021). Such initiatives underscore the importance of culturally resonant and inclusive models of peacebuilding—ones that move beyond the imposition of liberal norms to meaningfully engage with local practices of care, memory, and survival.

Moreover, the realm of post-conflict justice — including truth commissions, reparations, and transitional justice mechanisms — has been another site where African women have asserted their agency. In South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for instance, women's testimonies helped redefine the meaning of political violence to include gender-based harms, thereby expanding the moral and legal imagination of transitional justice (Scanlon, 2019). Feminist scholars have built on such interventions to argue for a “gendered continuum of violence” approach — one that recognizes the linkages between peacetime structural violence, wartime atrocities, and post-conflict gendered exclusions (Yacob-Haliso, 2019; Wibben, 2020). This continuum, as opined by True (2020) underscores that violence is not episodic or exceptional but embedded in everyday institutions and practices

— and that peace must be equally expansive and intersectional in scope.

Inherently, what emerges from the diverse experiences of African women in conflict zones is not a singular narrative but a complex tapestry of roles, strategies, and constraints. Women have participated as combatants, mediators, caregivers, mourners, and silent resisters, challenging linear framings of victimhood and disrupting global narratives of war that center male combatants and formal actors (KC, 2017; Berry & Lake, 2021). Their lives—often lived at the intersection of the public and private, peace and violence—embody what Cynthia Cockburn cited in Yadav (2021) terms the “frontlines of transformation,” where gendered boundaries are constantly negotiated and reimagined. These plural experiences expose the inadequacies of dominant security paradigms and point toward more grounded understandings of peace and agency in African contexts (Hendricks, 2015).

At the same time, feminist scholars warn against romanticizing women’s peacebuilding roles by projecting essentialist notions that women are inherently more peaceful or morally superior. While recognizing their critical contributions, such narratives risk instrumentalizing women while leaving patriarchal structures intact (Wilson, 2015; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). The imperative, therefore, is not just to include women in peace processes but to interrogate how

gendered power operates within and across conflict and post-conflict spaces. Centering African women’s experiences compels a redefinition of peace—not as the mere cessation of violence but as the cultivation of justice, care, and memory in everyday life (McLeod & O’reilly, 2019; Leatherman, 2024). In doing so, feminist perspectives move us beyond surface inclusion toward systemic transformation and the reimagining of security itself (True, 2020; Hudson, 2021).

Reclaiming Agency and Rethinking Power

The dominant conception of power in international relations (IR) has traditionally been defined through realist paradigms, emphasizing coercion, military might, and the pursuit of national interests within a system of sovereign states (Drezner, 2021). This understanding, deeply rooted in masculinist and Eurocentric logics, not only marginalizes non-state actors but also obscures alternative forms of power expressed through care, relationality, and community resilience (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016; Hooper, 2019). Thus, feminist and decolonial scholars have long challenged this orthodoxy, arguing for a redefinition of power that includes the capacities to nurture, negotiate, and sustain life in the face of systemic violence (Akinbobola, 2020; Hudson, 2021). Within this reconceptualization, African women are not peripheral to global politics—they are central

actors whose historical and contemporary practices of resistance, survival, and leadership constitute vital forms of political agency (Issifu, 2015; Sakue, 2017). Whether through market activism, communal organizing, or informal diplomacy, their actions unsettle dominant hierarchies and reimagine power as embedded in everyday life, rather than confined to elite statecraft (Bouilly et al., 2016; Bouka, 2020).

Reclaiming agency in this context entails more than integrating women into pre-existing power structures; it involves a fundamental reimagining of what power is, where it resides, and how it is exercised (Ali, 2015). Conventional international relations (IR) theory privileges coercive, hierarchical, and statist modes of authority, often sidelining alternative expressions of influence (Mattern & Zarakol, 2016). In contrast, feminist scholars emphasize the relational, cooperative, and everyday dimensions of power—dimensions that African women have historically embodied and navigated with resilience and creativity (Parpart, 2019; Wakefield & Zimmerman, 2020). From this perspective, power is not solely about commanding armies or controlling state institutions; it is equally about sustaining communities, negotiating survival amid precarity, and shaping moral and cultural imaginaries that define political life (Brubaker, 2021; Angeles, 2023).

In many African societies, women have historically exercised authority through informal yet deeply influential roles—as market leaders, queen mothers, priestesses, and custodians of moral and cultural norms (Parpart, 2019; Wright, 2020). These forms of authority often went unrecognized by colonial and patriarchal political systems that equated power exclusively with formal office and bureaucratic structures (Pailey, 2019). Even in the contemporary era, African women continue to wield influence in ways that subvert, bypass, and transcend official categories (Bawa & Adeniyi, 2018). The activism of women's organizations in Liberia—most notably the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement led by Leymah Gbowee—demonstrates how collective, nonviolent resistance can decisively influence the trajectory of civil conflict and national reconciliation (Masitoh, 2020). This form of grassroots political agency not only reshapes national outcomes but also defies the epistemological logic of conventional IR, which rarely accounts for such expressions of feminine and community-embedded power (Denagamage et al., 2024).

Moreover, African feminist scholars have emphasized that agency must be understood not solely through overt acts of resistance, but also through the quotidian negotiations, adaptations, and subtle subversions that women perform within patriarchal and colonial structures (Nkealah, 2016; Okech, 2020). From this perspective,

agency encompasses not only visible defiance but also the enduring practices of survival, care, and resilience through which women navigate and reshape their worlds under constraint (Page, 2018). Consequently, scholars such as Sakue (2017) and Bayu (2019) have critiqued Western feminist frameworks for portraying African women primarily as passive victims of patriarchy. Instead, they emphasize the contextual and historically contingent nature of gender relations in Africa—relations shaped by indigenous ontologies, sociocultural roles, and localized logics of power (Bertolt, 2018; Ngohengo, 2021). The existence of gender fluidity in several precolonial African societies, for example, challenges the rigid, essentialist binaries embedded in both colonial administration and Western feminist discourse (Agbaje, 2017). Reclaiming agency, therefore, entails not only confronting dominant paradigms but also recovering erased epistemologies and re-centering African women's lived realities as legitimate sources of theory, knowledge, and political resistance (Nkealah, 2016; Okech, 2020).

This redefinition of agency necessitates a corresponding rethinking of power. Rather than conceptualizing power as a zero-sum or dominative force, feminist theorists emphasize its productive, relational, and often invisible dimensions (Allen, 2018). In this regard, Michel Foucault's conception of power as diffuse, embedded in everyday

practices, and exercised through discourse and norms resonates with feminist frameworks that locate power not only in formal institutions but also in language, cultural symbols, and social expectations (Sawicki, 2020). Within African contexts, these subtle and embodied forms of power are evident in kinship structures, ritual practices, and the politics of respectability—arenas where women simultaneously navigate constraint and exercise agency (Okech, 2020; Babatunde, 2021). These relational configurations of power highlight the extent to which African women do not merely resist domination but actively participate in reshaping the very contours of power, often in ways obscured by dominant paradigms in international relations (Yacob & Falola, 2021).

In line with the foregoing, re-conceptualizing agency and power along feminist lines has profound implications for state-building and governance in postcolonial Africa. The modern African state, shaped by colonial legacies, has often sidelined indigenous political structures and cultural logics in favor of Western bureaucratic models (Motadi & Sikhwari, 2024). These imported frameworks tend to be hierarchical, masculinist, and largely detached from the moral economies and communal values that underpin everyday life in many African societies (Du Toit & Coetze, 2017). By reclaiming the agency of African women and embracing a multidimensional, relational

understanding of power, African states can reimagine governance not as a top-down apparatus of control, but as a participatory and ethical process rooted in the principles of care, reciprocity, and inclusiveness (Akinbobola, 2021; Okech, 2020).

This reorientation also necessitates a critical rethinking of political leadership. The enduring trope of the “strong man” in African political history valorizes dominance, aggression, and charismatic authority, reinforcing a model of governance that sidelines emotional intelligence, accountability, and collaboration (Ajiboro & Etieyibo, 2023). Feminist interventions offer an alternative vision—one in which leadership is grounded in empathy, shared responsibility, and moral legitimacy (Pullen & Vachhani, 2023). The growing visibility of women in political leadership across the continent, from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s presidency in Liberia to Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala’s global economic influence, reflects a gradual but meaningful disruption of entrenched masculinist norms, even as systemic barriers to gender equity persist (Adebayo, 2021; Yacob & Falola, 2021).

Importantly, reclaiming agency in the African feminist context is not about essentializing women or assuming a homogenous female experience. Rather, intersectional feminism emphasizes that power and marginalization are experienced differently depending on race, class,

ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and geographic location (Harris & Bartlow, 2015). Rural women, for instance, often face socio-political exclusion shaped by poverty and limited access to state institutions, while urban elites may navigate power differently through formal channels. Queer African women contend with compounded marginalization, facing both heteronormative violence and cultural erasure (Nzegwu, 2016; Igwe et al., 2017; Mkhize & Mthembu, 2023). A truly decolonial and feminist understanding of agency must remain attentive to these intersecting identities and the varied forms of exclusion they produce, while affirming the shared imperative to challenge systems that render African women invisible, disposable, or voiceless within both local and global orders (Akinbobola, 2021; Okech, 2020).

In sum, reclaiming agency and rethinking power through feminist lenses invites a profound reimagining of African statehood and global political order. This is not a call to invert hierarchies or replace male dominance with female dominance, but rather to unsettle the epistemic and structural foundations that naturalize gendered hierarchies in the first place (Arora, 2024). It demands a shift from dominative models of sovereignty toward relational, community-centered paradigms of governance that affirm care, reciprocity, and inclusion as political values (Akinbobola, 2021). By recognizing

the full humanity and political capacity of African women in all their diversity, such a reorientation challenges the legacies of colonial modernity and opens pathways to a more just, plural, and sustainable African future — one rooted not in imposed abstractions, but in lived realities and transformative solidarities (Bawa & Adeniyi, 2018; Okech, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that interrogating international relations (IR) through the lens of African feminist thought opens up critical avenues for rethinking global power, agency, and knowledge production. Conventional IR paradigms—shaped by Eurocentric and masculinist assumptions—have historically marginalized the voices, experiences, and epistemologies of African women (Duriesmith & Meger, 2020; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). Yet, as the analysis has shown, African women have never been mere bystanders to history. From their leadership roles in precolonial governance systems to their pivotal involvement in anti-colonial resistance and contemporary peacebuilding, African women have persistently exercised agency, disrupted dominant narratives, and redefined what constitutes political participation (Bouka, 2020; Ndlovu & Twala, 2024; Gbowee, 2011).

By recovering the historical and contemporary significance of African women's leadership—from queen

mothers and warrior figures to market queens and grassroots peace activists—this study underscores the need to expand our understanding of power in IR. African conceptions of power, often grounded in relationality, care, and collective well-being, stand in contrast to the coercive and hierarchical models valorized by mainstream IR (Hudson, 2021; Akinbobola, 2020). The marginalization of these alternative forms of power under colonial rule and postcolonial statecraft was not inevitable, but a result of deliberate erasures and the imposition of Western patriarchal norms (Tamale, 2020; Tripp et al., 2009). African feminist scholarship offers both the theoretical tools and the moral imperative to unlearn these legacies and imagine more inclusive and grounded forms of political engagement (Nkealah, 2016; Okech, 2020).

Crucially, the project of reclaiming agency is not about assimilating African women into pre-existing structures of dominance; it is about transforming the very frameworks that excluded them. Feminist critiques, particularly from the Global South, do not merely seek to diversify IR but to reconfigure its ontological and epistemological foundations. They challenge the gendered hierarchies of knowledge and power that determine whose experiences are deemed relevant and whose voices are heard in global politics (Prügl & Tickner, 2018; Bertolt, 2018; Yacob-Haliso, 2019). In doing so, African

feminists not only recover silenced histories but also envision new political imaginaries grounded in justice, memory, care, and solidarity.

Ultimately, to stand in solidarity with African women is to stand for the broader liberation of African societies. It is to reject narrow definitions of power that privilege domination over coexistence and to affirm a more human-centered global politics. As this paper has argued, feminist thought—especially in its African iterations—holds transformative potential not just for gender justice, but for reimagining international relations itself. In the words of Adichie (cited in True, 2020), “We should all be feminists”—not merely to redress gender inequities, but to rehumanize a world long structured by conquest, exclusion, and silence.

Recommendations

In light of the gendered critique of international relations and the historical marginalization of African women within global political discourses, this paper recommends the deliberate integration of African feminist perspectives into academic, policy, and institutional frameworks. At the educational level, curricula—particularly within African universities—must be decolonized to foreground the intellectual contributions, lived experiences, and epistemological innovations of African women. This involves presenting African women not as

passive subjects of global processes but as active agents of theory, resistance, and transformation (Nkealah, 2016; Okech, 2020). Rethinking IR also necessitates a paradigmatic shift in the conception of power and agency—from domination and hierarchy toward care, interdependence, and relational forms of leadership (Hudson, 2021; Akinbobola, 2020). Such a transformation would challenge masculinist statecraft and foster more holistic approaches to peacebuilding, governance, and political inclusion.

Second, African states and international institutions must enact structural reforms that substantively empower women, both politically and economically. This includes institutionalizing gender-inclusive governance, removing socio-economic barriers, and recognizing grassroots women’s organizations as legitimate political actors in state-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016; Issifu, 2015). African women’s roles as peacekeepers, revolutionaries, caregivers, and community leaders must be fully incorporated into policymaking processes—not as symbolic gestures but as foundational inputs to sustainable development and political stability (Cocodia, 2023). Regional and global bodies such as the African Union and the United Nations must go beyond rhetorical commitments and embed African feminist insights into the normative frameworks that guide peace processes, conflict resolution,

and development agendas (Haastrup, 2024). Where feminist foreign policies are adopted, they must be locally grounded and sensitive to Africa's socio-cultural contexts (Amadi & Amadi, 2015).

Finally, fostering transnational solidarities remains essential for the future of African feminist IR. Alliances between feminist scholars, activists, and movements across the Global South and North must be nurtured around shared struggles against patriarchy, neocolonialism, racial capitalism, and epistemic erasure (Lemay, 2024). However, such collaborations must avoid replicating the hegemonies they seek to dismantle. They should be rooted in mutual respect, horizontal learning, and an awareness of the historical asymmetries between Western and African feminist traditions (Bayu, 2019; Wright, 2020). Ultimately, reclaiming Africa's agency in global politics requires centering African women's voices—not as tokens of inclusion, but as theorists, leaders, and custodians of emancipatory visions for the future.

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