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Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa¹

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Violence against women has been a central concern of the international women's movement over the last two decades. In many countries, violent abuse has been taken up as the most salient and immediate manifestation of women's oppression by men, and in Africa, in particular, widespread violence against women is now probably the most direct and unequivocal manifestation of women's oppressed status. In most societies, rape and domestic violence have on occasion provoked public outrage, but it has been left to women's organizations and movements to take more concerted action. Both the different manifestations of violence that can be considered as gendered and the diverse character of antiviolence praxis can be illustrated with examples from different areas of the developing world. For instance, the most dynamic campaigns in the Caribbean were initially provoked by the common occurrence of rape, the trivialization of which had led feminists to establish the first rape-crisis centers and, thereafter, to initiate campaigns and highly innovative cultural actions. On the Indian subcontinent, sati and dowry deaths have been responded to at least as vehemently as rape, and it has been rape by government officials that has most provoked the wrath of feminists. African women's campaigns, for their part, have been less movement-based, with individuals and welfare and health groups campaigning against genital mutilation, child marriages, and other indigenous practices.² Even so, Africans have been surprisingly reticent on wife-beating and sexual harassment, despite their prevalence and the negative effects of both on personal and public life. The widespread harassment and

intimidation of women by power-crazed police and the overzealous implementation of antiwomen decrees and edicts by military forces also needs our serious attention.

A few incidents will illustrate both the severity of the situation and the range of forms that woman abuse takes:

- Piah Njoki was blinded in 1983 when her Kenyan husband, aided by two other men, gouged out both her eyes for bearing him daughters and not sons. In court, Mrs. Njoki implored the judge not to send her husband to prison, since she would then be left alone to fend for herself and her daughters in her state of blindness.
- On July 13, 1991, a group of male students attacked the girls' dormitories at St. Kizito secondary school in Kenya, raping seventy-one and killing nineteen.
- In 1987, twelve-year-old Hauwa Abubakar, from Nigeria, died after having both legs amputated. Her husband had attacked her with an axe after she had repeatedly run away from him.
- In 1983, several thousand women were detained by the Zimbabwean authorities, and many of them subjected to beating and other forms of abuse during "Operation Clean Up."

These examples raise a number of important questions about the social and cultural milieux in which abuse occurs, about the social and economic factors which oblige many women to tolerate life-threatening situations, and about the kind of political climate which empowers officials to perpetrate mass abuses against women on the streets of many African cities. All such situations have a history to them, and much of this essay is devoted to excavating this past, to tracing the genealogy of the conditions which foster violence against women, one of the most unpalatable facts of postcolonial life. It is my view that the prevalence of so many pernicious forms of gendered violence demands both historical and contemporary analysis. By deepening our understanding of violence against women during the epoch of imperialism, we will be better able to comprehend and so to counteract the multiple forms of violence meted out against women in postcolonial African states today. Imperialism is the major trope of this analysis because it is the common historical force that makes it possible to consider an area as large and diverse as the African continent as having general features that transcend the boundaries of nation, culture, and geography. This collective African experience—being conquered by the colonizing powers; being culturally and materially subjected to a nineteenth-century European racial hierarchy and its gender politics; being indoctrinated into all-male European administrative systems, and the insidious paternalism of the new religious and educational systems; and facing the continuous flow of material and human resources from Africa to Europe—has persistently affected all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life in postcolonial African states.

The conditions of women's lives in Europe and Africa are also linked, since these two regions have been inextricably bound together in a dynamic of growing inequality since the dawn of colonialism. Imperialism, therefore, provides an important lens for studying the dynamics that have led to the present conditions, not to simplify or impose homogeneity on the diversities within either region but to lay out a foundation which may direct our investigation of the specificities of particular contexts.

I begin by examining the historical evidence which indicates that colonial penetration was both a violent and a gendered process, which exploited preexisting social divisions within African culture. Paying particular attention to gender, I argue that the colonial period saw an increased vulnerability of African women to various forms of violence. Since the relationship between Europe and Africa entailed Africa's subjection by Europe, it may be worthwhile to take a look at gender relations and gender violence at the imperial source before addressing the genesis and perpetuation of gender violence in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

The final part of this essay examines the forms of resistance that women have spearheaded, indicating the strategies deployed by women in different parts of the African continent and comparing these to other Third-World and Western feminist antiviolence struggles.

The Colonial Period

Patriarchy at the Imperial Source

When imperialism is traced back to its roots in European history, the violent and male-dominated character of the civilization that set out to "civilize" the African continent emerges quite clearly. The history of gender violence in Europe raises many questions about European masculinity and about the gender ideologies that lay behind the emergence of today's European states. The misogynistic character of that nascent political culture can perhaps be most dramatically illustrated with reference to the witch-hunts and inquisitions of the Middle Ages. It is now common knowledge that over a four-hundred-year period (from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century), several million women were systematically dismembered, disfigured, and tortured before being drowned or burned alive (Chesler 1972, Mies 1986). Mies also cites the example of a lawyer in Leipzig, Germany, who personally sentenced 20,000 women to death in the course of his highly successful career.

More recently, during the last century, the lot of European women was so miserable that in 1853 a certain Mr. Fitzroy put it to the English House of Commons that the nation should treat married women "no worse than domestic animals" (Dobash and Dobash 1980). With the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalist social relations, the European

working classes, particularly women and children, were exploited in evil ways that would subsequently be perfected on African slaves and forced laborers in the colonies. Literature and public records indicate that physical violence characterized relations between men and women as well as between ruling and oppressed classes and between adults and children. Women from the oppressed classes were sexually as well as economically exploited and many of those who moved to the cities found themselves choosing between the brothel and the poorhouse. A great many were rounded up and deported in shiploads to the New World colonies where an even tougher existence awaited those who survived the passage. It is ironic that the Europeans, who came from such a patriarchal civilization, nevertheless had the audacity to pose as heroic protectors and uplifters of women when they arrived in the colonies (Mies 1986).

At the dawn of imperialism, Europe was also giving shape to and developing its racist ideologies and practices. As far back as the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth, the "Virgin Queen" who stood for purity, virtue, and whiteness, made several attempts to have black people removed from the kingdom; her 1601 proclamation called for the banishment of "black-amoores." In later centuries, the pedestalization of upper-class white womanhood was counterpoised to an inferiorized construction of blackness. Black people were cast as hypersexual, corrupt, and pathogenic. Black women attracted sexual fascination, and by the nineteenth century, had come to feature in the white male psyche as a metaphor for Africa, the dark and unknown continent, waiting to be penetrated, conquered, and despoiled. In the case of Saartjie Baartman, who, as "The Hottentot Venus," was displayed, catalogued, and had her genitals dissected, this dehumanization was rationalized, first, as harmless "entertainment," then, under the guise of "scientific interest."³

The oppression of women within Europe had a direct bearing on the treatment of women in the colonies. McClintock (1991b) argues that Britain's notorious Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, scapegoated women at a time when several key military defeats inflicted on the imperial armies had provoked a crisis in European masculinity. "Corrupt" women were blamed for weakening the troops, so attempts were made to regulate prostitution, both in Britain and in the colonies.⁴ It hardly needs to be pointed out that legislation of this sort primarily affected women from the lower social strata, not upper- and middle-class women.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, class, race, and sexual inequalities acted in concert with one another, generating a repressive imperial ideology that was to be reflected in all aspects of colonial, legal, and administrative treatment of the subject peoples. This was to have particular implications for gender relations, rendering African women more vulnerable to the violence emanating from both European and African sources.

Race and Sex in the Colonies

The development of legislative controls over relations between European men and African women indicates the contradictory sexuality of imperial masculinity, straddled as it was on the twin horns of the dilemma that resulted from simultaneous desire and contempt. It also indexes the steady degradation of African women's ascribed status under colonial regimes. In the early period, trading and other relations between European men and Africans followed the initial contact between their respective civilizations. The nineteenth-century institution of "signareship" and the significant numbers of interracial cohabitations and marriages found along the West Coast of Africa point to the existence of a great many relationships between French merchants and African women, although the racial politics of these liaisons have not been the subject of much discussion.⁵

The British appear to have had a more puritanical attitude toward interracial unions. This is reflected in the 1909 "concubinage circular," which imposed penalties on British men for having sex with African women. In 1914, Lord Lugard, the governor general of Nigeria, tactlessly issued "Secret Circular B," which equated miscegenation with bestiality.⁶ Marriage to African women was made taboo in other parts of Africa, too. In 1905, the Germans, confronted with the so-called "bastard problem" in the territory that was to become Namibia, forbade marriage to African women, while, at the same time, encouraging prostitution and concubinage. In 1907, they declared marriages contracted before that date to be null and void, and in 1908, retroactivated this principle to dispossess all the offspring of such unions in order to exclude them from the possibility of claiming their German father's citizenship or inheriting property and land in the Fatherland (Mies 1986).

On the other hand, it was not uncommon for the colonizers to organize prostitution services for their troops, so that their desires for local women could be satiated in ways which did not undermine the racial status-quo (Enloe 1989), with some even going so far as to reserve certain women "for white men only."

It would seem from this discussion that the legal status of African women was steadily degraded as imperialism advanced, consolidating patriarchal and racist gender values which commodified African women by encouraging prostitution but outlawing the contract of legitimate marriages between white men and black women. We shall see that these trends were continued by colonial states which cast all African women in urban areas as "prostitutes" and subjected them to periodic waves of victimization and harassment, while, at the same time, creating conditions that made the numerous services provided by women indispensable to the colonized male workforce.

The Colonial State and Violence toward Women

Rape appears to have been a frequent accompaniment to military conquests, and was a favored means of ensuring the defeat and pacification of entire nations. Unfortunately, the historical record has been very scant on this subject. Even so, the limited evidence that is available suggests that sexual violence was an integral part of colonization.

Fanon (1980) notes the link between conquest of land and peoples and the violation of women, a link which has subsequently been identified as characterizing colonial literature of the Rider Haggard genre (Stott 1989). According to both, the colonized woman becomes associated in the mind of the European with fantasies of rape and despoliation. Such fantasies are fueled by the inaccessibility of local women (in Muslim areas), but more widely function as a metaphor for conquest of African lands and the humiliation of peoples.

The harsh reality of conquest in Africa included widespread violation and degradation of African women. Where there was resistance, rape and sexual abuse were inflicted on women and the same treatment was meted out to the wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of men who were suspected of being members of the resistance movements simply to humiliate them.

The use of violent techniques in various European attempts to crush the nationalist movements in many parts of Africa also demonstrates the inadequacy of "gender-only" analysis. To simplify the nature of colonization and the violence that it deployed as just another instance of "male violence" is to obscure the full character of imperialism and the internal contradictions it has so successfully exploited.

In many parts of the continent, colonial regimes intent on the forcible introduction of waged- and migrant-labor systems, sought to restrict the movement of African women, who were expected to remain in the rural areas and continue to engage in subsistence production, while their menfolk were lured to the mines and towns. Nonetheless, women also migrated to the towns to earn money by providing support services; other women abandoned homesteads that were then in decline. Still others, as women have done throughout the ages, moved away to escape violent marriages or quite simply migrated in search of new ways of living. Whatever the case, women moved to the towns in large numbers and, as they were excluded from wage-work in the formal sector, found innovative ways of living on the margins of colonial society and its economy.⁷

Lacking any clear policy or any real knowledge, the colonial state demonstrated confused and contradictory attitudes toward African women. For example, Schmidt (1991) notes that in colonial Zimbabwe, official attitudes toward African women were even worse than those toward men, apparently because while men were "remarkably receptive of European ideas," women

tended to "cling to old superstitions, the old customs and the old methods." She further notes that African women were said to wield immense power over men, and that women's sexual demands were identified as obstructing the recruitment of men to work for the colonizers. Certainly, the presence of women in the colonial towns was viewed with immense suspicion. Measures taken to remove women from the urban areas included periodic round-ups and forcible deportations, often carried out with the connivance of elderly African men, who felt frustrated by what they saw as a loss of control over their homesteads. For example, in 1915, the British colonial officers attempted to restrict the number of "free women" in the Nigerian city of Katsina, proposing that those within the city walls be given seven days to marry, while those defined as prostitutes be driven away. Similarly, in Kenya, during the 1940s, local councils passed such oddly named measures as the "Lost Women Ordinance," which sought to limit the movement of women to the towns.

Women, for their part, waged intermittent struggles against the losses of power that they experienced. To cite only two examples out of a great many that occurred across the continent, in Eastern Nigeria, women rose up periodically throughout the 1920s to resist the introduction of a range of measures which they saw as undermining their rights (Van Allen 1972, Amadiume 1987). The colonial state responded to the Women's War with military action, killing at least fifty women. In Western Nigeria, women organized against colonially appointed chiefs and ousted some of the rulers who became too autocratic (Mba 1982).

So far, this discussion has mainly addressed the violent treatment meted out to African women by a colonial state which excluded women from all political and administrative structures and from the wage economy that was rapidly superseding precolonial modes of production. But it is also worth noting that overt violence, including widespread abuse of women and the reinforcement of the interests of male despots by the colonial regime, was not the whole picture. There was also the seemingly "benevolent" side of colonial patriarchy, a side which sought to "domesticate" and, so, to incorporate a small but significant number of African women. There is now a substantial literature addressing the ways in which the colonizers introduced a bourgeois Victorian ideology of domesticity into Africa. While the vast majority of African women gained no access to education at all, a minority was invited to acquire the graces of "civilized" femininity, namely, to be schooled in embroidery, cake decoration, and flower arranging. The purpose was to turn these women into suitable wives for those African men who performed administrative roles in the colonial state. Much of this indoctrination was undertaken by well-intentioned European women anthropologists, missionaries, and teachers, who set out for the African interior to educate and "uplift" the natives.⁸ Hunt (1990) documents the

activities of Le Foyer Sociale, a social institution specifically designed by the Belgians to create a small cadre of elite Congolese housewives. These colonially constructed "new women" were to stay at home and keep house for the small numbers of African men in the employ of the colonial regime.⁹ Like other class ideologies, domesticity has affected even those who were not part of the elite that actually became European-style housewives. The dominance of the wife-and-mother ideal, an ideal which negated women's social and economic contribution, facilitated the devaluation of their work within the colonial economy.

In addition to perpetrating crude and overt acts of violence against African women, then, the colonization process also transformed African gender relations in complex, diverse, and contradictory ways that we have yet to fully understand. We now know that these transformations, and the dynamic between the colonial regime and the colonized society, varied across social classes. They must also have varied in part according to the character of gender relations in the preexisting social and political systems, and the cultural, political, and economic powers that women had been able to mobilize in defense of their gender. Prevailing gender ideologies have much bearing on the types of violence that are manifested in a given context. The confinement of women to the economically dependent role of housewife is a condition that has made it difficult for many women to leave otherwise unbearably violent situations. In other words, the domestication of women is a precondition for the crime we define as domestic violence. Similarly, the power to coerce, intimidate, and harass that is wielded by officials and men in uniform in dictatorial societies is a condition for the widespread rape and abuse of women that occur under repressive regimes, since this power is sanctioned by military, religious, or other male-dominated authorities.

African Nationalist Movements and the Gender Question

If, as we have seen, colonialism brutalized, degraded, and domesticated African women, to what extent have the nationalist movements challenged the misogynistic and sexually contradictory legacies of the white masters? Have African women experienced greater liberation since the demise of colonial regimes, or have the nationalists merely continued the trajectories of contempt and disempowerment? What has been the role of women in anti-imperialist struggles, and how has this affected their position in post-colonial states?

Anne McClintock usefully reminds us of the gendered and continuously contested character of nations when she writes:

All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous.... They represent relations to political power and to the

technologies of violence ... legitimizing, or limiting, people's access to the rights and resources of the nation-state (McClintock 1991a).

The foregoing discussion of rape and conquest indicates that colonialism also humiliated women, not only as colonial subjects but also in gender-specific ways. African nationalist discourses have often proclaimed the need to recover the damaged manhood of the African man. Cynthia Enloe (1989) points to the masculinity of many nationalist discourses and the exploitation of male humiliation by liberation movements; she identifies this as a source of male bias in emergent nations. But to what extent have African men been concerned with restoring the dignity of African women? It is now amply documented that women, who were completely excluded from the colonial administrative and political structures, actively participated in the nationalist movements as fighters and party activists. And on many occasions, they took independent action in defense of their own interests as women.

Still, today, women protest the betrayal of women's interests by the nation-states, citing Algeria and Zimbabwe as instances in which men have reneged on their promise to share the fruits of independence. But is there an empirical basis for this sense of betrayal? An examination of gender relations within nationalist discourses may deepen our understanding of the sources of present-day inequalities and enable more effective responses than angry polemics against the men who have monopolized power for themselves. What, then, were the terms on which women participated in these resistance struggles? Perhaps the poor status of the vast majority of women in postcolonial African countries can be traced to the terms of this participation!

The constructions of women in nationalist ideologies have been contradictory. On the one hand, nationalists have called for their own "new woman," while on the other hand, they have construed women as the bearers and upholders of traditions and customs, as reservoirs of culture.¹⁰ In a great many contexts, the terms on which women participated in nationalist struggles have simply not been commensurate with fundamental changes in gender relations. The appearance of harem women on the streets of Egypt during the 1920s to protest against the British may have been welcomed by all supporters of national liberation, but it did not transform male attitudes towards women. Some time later, when the Wafdist Party disagreed with women on key political issues, Huda Sharaawi and other women broke away to form the Egyptian Feminist Union, which not only took more radical positions on a number of key political issues but also defended women's interests (Sharaawi 1986, Badran 1988).

National liberation movements such as the Nkrumah-led CPP, although

radical when it came to establishing hegemony over traditional chiefs, cannot be described as propounding a radical gender politics, even though the movement derived enormous support from women's organizations. For all his revolutionary vision, Kwame Nkrumah was unable to view women beyond their reproductive and nurturing roles. He referred to women as: "Mothers of the nation, the beauty that graced the homes and the gentleness that soothed men's tempers" (Tsikata 1989). Many of the nationalists who inherited power from the colonial masters were overtly conservative when it came to matters of sexual politics. Jomo Kenyatta, for example, perhaps wishing to appear nationalistic in the face of missionary activity, asserted that "No Kikuyu worthy of the name would want to marry a girl who [had] not been excised, as this operation [was] a prerequisite for receiving a complete moral and religious education" (Kenyatta 1953).¹¹ Similar examples can be found in the writings of Sekou Touré, Julius Nyerere, and many other founding fathers of African nationalism. In 1955, Oliver Tambo made what must have been one of the most radical statements of his generation when he not only declared women's emancipation to be a national priority and a precondition for victory but also went so far as to deplore "outmoded customs" and call upon Congressmen to share in domestic work so that women could also be politically active. At the other extreme, one of the most retrograde examples was the Nigerian nationalist leader Tafawa Balewa, who opposed women being given the vote in the northern part of the country, despite the enfranchisement of women in the south.¹²

The African countries cited as most progressive on "the woman question" have tended to be those that have involved women in military action, and not coincidentally women across the globe have adopted posters of women carrying guns as icons of revolutionary feminism.¹³ Urdang's (1989) study of women's place in the Mozambican war for independence reveals that most of the women fighters actually performed inglorious but necessary tasks (catering, portage, etc). Others were dispatched to rural areas because as women in a sexually unequal society, they were able to shame men into volunteering. The participation of women in Namibia and in the ongoing liberation war in South Africa has also been studied, but this will require ongoing consideration if majority rule is to include more equal participation of women (not least of all because black women in South Africa have been so oppressed and excluded). It is now clear that even progressive statements from the leadership do not suffice to effect change in the gender relations of a society.

And what happened to women in those places where victory has been secured? Regrettably, the treatment of women in several of the independent states proves that participation in military activity does not necessarily translate into progressive gender politics. As revolutionary a hero as the late

Samora Machel is on record reinforcing the sexual division of labor by calling on Mozambican women, but not men, to clean up the streets of Maputo. Reports from Zimbabwe inform us that many of the women who joined men in the bush to fight the white settler regime found themselves rejected in favor of more traditionally feminine women once the fighting was over. But if the gender relations amongst the fighters were as unequal in the field as Urdang's evidence suggests, what basis was there for assuming gender equality would be a necessary fruit of military victory?²⁴ Even if things were far more progressive on the field of battle, it is quite clear that it is necessary to wage a continuing struggle to deepen women's liberation, even after national independence has been granted or won by military action.

It seems clear that African women entered the postcolonial period at an immense disadvantage and under global conditions which, while increasingly unfavorable to Africa as a whole, nonetheless favored men, who arrogate to themselves the authority of articulating the nation's culture and politics. This background offers some insight into why postcolonial societies have continued to be so oppressive to women.

Gender Ideologies and Violence in Postcolonial Africa

The gender politics of postcolonial African governments vary widely, but women continue to be underrepresented in positions of influence (Parpart and Staudt 1989). It often seems that those nations that opted for a socialist model of development have been more progressive than those that did not. In the nascent socialist states, strong women's organizations ensured women's participation in political life by waging campaigns for women's rights, and taking it upon themselves to challenge practices such as wife-beating and forced marriages. The existence of official women's organizations did much to raise the profile of women in the newly independent states. As a result, the legal and constitutional situation for women in Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, or even Zimbabwe is ahead of many Western countries. Economic dependence continues to preclude fuller exercise of legal rights, however, and issues such as land ownership and the implementation of progressive marriage laws leave much to be desired.

On the other hand, states pursuing capitalist models of development show a different structure and practice of gender inequality. Wamalwa (1989) describes how male Kenyan Parliamentarians repeatedly opposed the replacement of old colonial laws and resisted the introduction of a Marriage Bill in 1968 which would have made wife-beating a criminal offense punishable by six months imprisonment; the Kenyan politicians claimed that wife-beating was "a normal customary practice." In West African states like Nigeria, bureaucratic, social, and cultural inequality prevail but, in practice, most women exercise a high degree of autonomy, a situation facilitated by their involvement in independent economic activi-

ties. The high public profile of the wives of the military elite gives the impression that at least these women are extremely powerful in contemporary Nigeria, but even a cursory examination of the empirical evidence indicates this to be far from the truth (WIN 1985).

Since the economic crisis gripped the continent in the 1970s, African women have faced some of the harshest living conditions and forms of oppression in the modern world. The decline of many African economies has been accompanied by political crises, and it is in this context that sexual and coercive controls over women have often been exercised with a vengeance, just as they were in the colonial period. This is exemplified by the "clean-up campaigns" that have taken place in a number of countries. The evidence from Zimbabwe (Jacobs and Howard 1987), Gabon, Zambia, Tanzania, and other nations reveals that these campaigns are frequently accompanied by widespread abuse of women. The women rounded up in Gabon in 1985, for example, were made available to soldiers for the latter's sexual pleasure (Tabet 1991).

Postcolonial national ideologies continue to call upon women to play a circumscribed role, this time as Mothers of the Nation. Mobutu's official doctrine involves the mass "promotion" of women to mere wives and mothers, in an economic climate that compels women to engage in all forms of work outside the home, and often to support entire households. In the postcolonial context, Mobutu's ideology of domesticity distorts the real production relations of the whole country by devaluing women's economic contributions, and thus facilitating greater exploitation of both women and men by international capitalism. Recent research conducted in Zimbabwe shows that since the end of the liberation war, the proportion of women gaining access to education has actually fallen, and that this is most pronounced in the field of higher education (Gaidzanwa 1991). In addition to the public victimization of women by postcolonial regimes, there is also a high tolerance of domestic violence. A Zimbabwean women's group informs us that between January and December 1990, in Harare alone, there were 576 reports of rape and 17,646 reports of assault, of which approximately 5,000 were defined as domestic assaults (Taylor and Stewart 1991). There is no reason to assume that Harare is different from any other postcolonial African capital.

There are a great many ways in which official ideologies interact with civil institutions to reinforce the subordination of women, both directly and indirectly. In Nigeria, we have seen a close interaction between the military governments' campaigns and rising religious fundamentalism, both of which target women directly but also promote violence against them. One of the most unpopular regimes mounted a "War Against Indiscipline" campaign, which attributed the country's worsening economic and political crisis to "moral decadence and laxity." Consequently, dispossessed beggars, homeless people, street hawkers, and women were subjected to all manner

of harassment. At the time, the media diffused negative images of women, blaming them for widespread immorality and corruption. In this context, in 1986, the military governor of Kano State issued an edict which outlawed single women and which included the ultimatum that women had three months to get married or "be dealt with."¹⁵ A year later, an underground Muslim brotherhood known as "yan daukar amariya" was uncovered when several of its members were arrested for the rape and violent abuse of women.¹⁶ The professed purpose of this fraternity was to molest and violate any woman found on the streets alone, on the basis that those women had no right to be there.

Wamalwa (1989) comments on the underreporting of violence, and draws our attention to the fact that 40 percent of all cases of domestic violence identified by a preliminary survey in Kenya involved the murder or manslaughter of the woman. This suggests an extremely high tolerance for violence. More recently, during the public outcry over the massacre at St. Kizito school, the headmaster was reported to have remarked that the boys "meant no harm, they only wanted to rape." In any case, most of the press coverage focused on the killings rather than on the rapes.¹⁷ As in many other contexts, woman abuse exists "beyond the law" since the existing legal provisions are not enforced by male police, magistrates, or courts. No man has ever been given the full sentence for rape in Kenya.

Reports by human-rights organizations reveal disturbing evidence of women being detained, sexually abused, and tortured by repressive regimes in Sudan, Mauritania, and Somalia.¹⁸ In short, it seems that a tolerance for violence against women has continued to characterize African social and political life since independence; violence itself appears to be proliferating under the harsh and desperate economic and political conditions now prevailing in many parts of the continent. The final part of this essay considers what measures have been taken to curb this disturbing situation, and how these initiatives compare with those taken in other parts of the world.

Anti-Violence Struggles and Strategies

From the evidence presented above, it is clear that the coercive control of women, endemic in the colonial period, has gone unchallenged by postcolonial regimes. The evidence from women's studies in the West indicates that there, too, women are far from equal in most areas of social life. While a great many changes in women's positions and ways of living have occurred in Africa as well as in Europe, violence against woman has continued to be widespread in both regions. Given the historical continuities and fractures in the structural relationships between black and white women in Europe and in the African colonies, it would be worthwhile to analyze the role violence plays in configuring these processes.

Feminist Praxis on Violence in the West

In the West, women have mobilized and campaigned both inside and outside state structures, with sometimes impressive results. In several European and North American countries, the laws and legal procedures affecting abused women have been changed. Policing practices have come under particularly heavy criticism (Edwards 1986), and this has led some police forces to introduce special training on how to respond better to domestic violence. Improved access to public housing and the provision of refuges for battered women are other concrete results of a long and committed struggle by women's movements. However, a recent study of responses to violence against black women in London indicated that these strategies have been less effective in ameliorating the situation of black and minority women who have been subjected to violence (Mama 1989b).

Mainstream Western feminist theorizations of violence often do not take into account the realities of black women's lives. This is partly because, in the West, it has been radical feminists who have been at the forefront of the organized campaigns aimed at eradicating male violence against women. Within radical feminist discourse, gender is regarded as the most fundamental social division, and men are viewed as being inherently and irredeemably aggressive. In keeping with this view, radical feminists treat women as if they were a single homogeneous group, devoid of class and racial inequalities, reduced to mere instances of male power. Socialist and liberal feminists have been less vocal in this area of feminist praxis, with the result that these particular radical views have dominated the antiviolence movement.

Feminist responses to violence against women in late-capitalist countries have also presumed a certain type of state structure, namely one that provides welfare support, such as housing, and a law-abiding, if recalcitrant, police force. It has been assumed that most women live in nuclear marriages with breadwinning husbands upon whom they are economically dependent. However, these assumptions do not hold for many black and working-class women. For one thing, public services have failed miserably in their attempts to offer appropriate support to black women, and welfare professionals (mostly from parochial middle-class backgrounds) have often demonstrated their class prejudices. For another, because of racism, black women face additional hardships in obtaining public housing, appropriate police protection, or legal support. On account of the increasingly discriminatory immigration laws many black women constantly confront the risk of being deported when and if they seek assistance, or of being racially harassed when and if they seek police or legal intervention.

Even within the so-called liberal democracies of Western Europe, women are subordinated in diverse ways, a fact which feminist theorists of violence have yet to fully address. But the transfer of European feminist theories and

strategies to Africa cannot be easy. Not only are there historical biases which have not been purged, but these theories have also been developed in late-capitalist contexts under a specific set of conditions that are very different from those in African countries. Britain, for example, is a welfare state, and there are complex legal and public policy considerations which are preconditions for even the limited success of the women's movements there. Even within such contexts, black feminists have found it necessary to organize autonomously with a view to articulating a different antiviolence politics—drawing attention to acts of violence against both sexes, acts of aggression perpetrated by the state itself, the deaths of black men in police custody, and police assaults on black women. Also, they have had to highlight the vulnerability of black people to racial attacks on the streets and in housing estates. In short, black feminists in the so-called liberal democracies have concluded that it is inadequate to theorize violence as an inherently male characteristic with only women as victims.

To illustrate further the nontransferability of Western feminist strategies to the developing world, consider what happened when the British strategy of establishing refuges for women was adopted by some Indian women's groups. In the absence of long-term housing options for battered women in the Subcontinent, where there is not the same kind of public housing as in Britain, new problems of homelessness and destitution were created for the women survivors, who, having left their homes, had neither a home to return to nor any other alternative accommodation.

African Antiviolence Struggles

Only in very few countries has the state has been the main vehicle for antiviolence activism. In Uganda, women Parliamentarians have been extremely vocal. Perhaps because the rape and abuse of women had become so widespread during the years of dictatorship and war, after much heated debate, the controversial Immorality Act was passed in 1990.¹⁹ This contains provisions for stringent sentences for rape (life imprisonment) and child rape (death sentence).²⁰ At the time of this writing, no one has yet been convicted or sentenced under these provisions but, at the local level, rape cases are being reported and dealt with by the local Resistance Councils.²¹

In other African countries, women's projects have been able to secure donor funding to conduct research and produce resource material and information packages for use in antiviolence work. The Tanzanian Women's Media Association in Dar Es Salaam and the Women and Law in Southern Africa research network are just two examples. In Nigeria, despite the huge amount of publicity surrounding the First Lady's "Better Life Programme," including the recent launching of a multimillion-dollar center for women's development, there has been no official action on woman abuse. Rather, it was left to an autonomous and relatively low-profile organization like

Women in Nigeria to hold the first ever workshop on the subject as recently as March 1992.

It also needs to be said, on the basis of the ungathered evidence of millions of women all over the continent, that African women have not been passive recipients of abuse, as some authorities would have us believe. The evidence that is available suggests that they have found numerous ways of resisting the humiliations meted out to them, both individually and with the help of sympathetic friends and relatives. In the same way, African communities daily house and support millions of refugees locally, with none of the hostility that affluent nations now direct toward the few thousand who have been driven as far as Europe. Here, where there is no welfare-delivery system, it must be said that for every abused woman who makes the headlines by being killed or maimed, or for each of those who suffer in clubbed-down silence, there must be many thousands who receive local support and who engage in a hidden struggle for their survival and dignity—a continuous struggle that neither receives nor demands acknowledgment.

Conclusion

From the historical record, we saw how, during the colonial period, new gender ideologies were introduced, ideologies regarding women's and men's status across the African continent. Colonial gender ideologies were the product of both internal and external factors, and were fed by cultural and material conditions which interacted in complex ways as we entered the postcolonial epoch. There is clearly a need for more detailed study of these developments in particular locales, even as we forge international links. We need to understand and theorize the diversity within different nations and across the African continent, and the ways in which Europe underdeveloped different parts of Africa differently, common legacies at the level of state structures and circumscribed constructions of womanhood notwithstanding.

This essay has sketched a general framework which highlights the ways in which the European chauvinistic constructions of femininity and a marginalizing ideology of domesticity decreased the legal and social status of African women in many spheres of life, in both rural and urban areas. As I have shown, when we consider the history of woman abuse, we must recognize that there have been pernicious continuities between colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial systems.

I have tried to argue that perhaps because of the pervasiveness and extreme character of woman abuse in the region, African women have had to rely on their own indigenous strategies; some have left violent situations while others embark upon completely different lifestyles, often with the covert support of other women or sympathetic members of their communities. No doubt, many of these heroic responses have been invisible

because they have usually been individual reactions to horrendous conditions and have remained unsupported by the communities at large. In recent years, women have begun to resist violence in a more collective manner, both within and outside state structures. Women have deployed different strategies in different countries with varying degrees of success. It is high time that these bold initiatives won more definite support at the local, national, and international levels.