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## **Situating "wicked" women: gender panic and savoir vivre in urban Senegal**

Oudenhuijsen, L.W.

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# **SITUATING “WICKED” WOMEN**

**Gender Panic and *Savoir Vivre*  
in Urban Senegal**

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*Loes Oudenhuijsen*



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**“WICKED” WOMEN**  
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in Urban Senegal

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*Loes Oudenhuijsen*



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# **SITUATING “WICKED” WOMEN**

## **Gender Panic and *Savoir Vivre* in Urban Senegal**

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**Promotores:**

Prof.dr. R.A. van Dijk

Prof.dr. R. Spronk (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

**Promotiecommissie:**

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Dr. A.C. Mbaye (Universiteit Utrecht)

To Meta, for her immense courage  
And to all the other “wicked” women of the world

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# Introduction

During a meeting of the Senegalese National Assembly on 1 December 2022, Amy Ndiaye, member of parliament (MP) and part of the then presidential coalition *Benno Bokk Yakaar*, was slapped in the face and kicked in the stomach by two male colleagues and members of the opposition party Parti de l'Unité et du Rassemblement (PUR). She was slapped by a colleague because she had critiqued Serigne Moustapha Sy, PUR's head and the spiritual leader of the Islamic religious movement of the Moustarchidines.<sup>1</sup> According to Amy Ndiaye, Serigne Moustapha Sy had showed a lack of respect for the then President Macky Sall when he had critiqued Sall for his ambiguity about a possible third term as a president. Amy Ndiaye responded to the slap by throwing a chair in the direction of her colleague, after which another PUR colleague kicked her in the stomach. Ndiaye was pregnant at the time, and she was admitted to hospital following these attacks. The two men were arrested and convicted to six months in prison for “*coups et blessures volontaires*” (F: intentional physical assault) (TV5Monde 2022a).

The scene was recorded on camera and the video quickly spread in Senegal and beyond (Al Jazeera 2022). There was significant outrage to this public display of violence, and many Senegalese were ashamed that the news spread around the world, with Al Jazeera, TV5Monde, and Jeune Afrique, among others, reporting the incident. Comment sections on news sites, Twitter (now X) and Facebook were full of indignation for the public violence against a woman. One of the responses that circulated, particularly among Senegalese *féministes*, was that this display of violence against a female parliamentarian made painfully clear how widespread misogyny is in Senegal.<sup>2</sup> If these MPs were bold enough to publicly physically attack a woman, imagine what went on behind closed doors, people commented. Even more embarrassing, others said, was that this happened during the “sixteen days of activism to end violence against women,” a global campaign that raises awareness for gender-based violence. The campaign had been endorsed by the Senegalese government, and the Ministry of Women, the Family, and the Protection of Children had co-organised events for the campaign with civil society organisations.

<sup>1</sup> The Moustarchidines movement, short for the Dahiratoul Moustarchidina wal Moustarchidaty, is a religious organisation that arose from tensions within the Sy family who lead the Sufi Tijaniyya brotherhood from the city of Tivaouane. It was created by Cheikh Tidiane Sy in 1980, and its emergence reflects tensions over legitimate power in the Sy family. The organisation has effectively been governed by Cheikh Tidiane's son, Moustapha Sy, and it continues to be led by him today. See Villalón (1999) for an elaboration on how the Moustarchidine movement is, among other things, exemplary of evolving dynamics of religion and politics in Senegal in the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Later in this chapter, I explain who my *féministe* interlocutors were and how they relate to my research. For an explanation of the terms I use to describe my interlocutors, including my choice to write *féministes* instead of “feminists,” see the section “language and terminology” on page 45 of this introduction.

The attack on Amy Ndiaye signals a tense political terrain in which (older) power structures are shifting and being challenged. Amy Ndiaye had directly challenged a patriarchal and religious authority in parliament, and the response to hit her was a way to communicate that she had crossed a line, according to the two MPs who had attacked her (TV5Monde 2022b). The incident points at a paradox that has become visible in many contexts in which patriarchal power is challenged. Where women rise to positions of power and become increasingly visible in professional spaces and public debates, they often encounter a backlash in response to a fear of changing gendered power relations (Cole and Moore 2020; Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2023; OHCHR 2023). The growing visibility of women in Senegalese politics is a result of a parity law that prescribes equal representation of women and men in parliament. The law was adopted in 2010, after a two-year period of debate during the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade, with important contributions from Senegalese women's organisations and Senegalese gender scholars (Fall-Sokhna and Thiéblemont-Dollet 2009; Tellingator and Weeks 2019). The project had encountered considerable resistance from conservative voices in society and from male politicians who feared that they would lose their positions of power (Fassa and Roca i Escoda 2016). This dissertation explores how women relate to such public debates, moral panics about gender and sexuality that animate these debates, and the policing of gender norms that results from these panics in Senegal. While this dissertation is not concerned with the role of women politicians in public debates per se, this particular case and the broader political turmoil that has characterised Senegalese public debates in the last couple of years, sheds light onto the sociopolitical context that the women who are central to this study have to navigate as they live their lives.

In addition to the gender aspect of the incident, Senegalese citizens may also have been ashamed by the fact that the whole world bore witness to how nasty politics had become in Senegal (Gomis 2022). The attack on Amy Ndiaye, and the worldwide circulation of the video thereof, shattered some of the long-standing ideas that Senegal wished to sustain: that Senegal is a democratic nation, relatively advanced in terms of women's public representation, and overall a success story in the West African region. Senegal has long been regarded a political success story, and it has prided itself with being a beacon of democracy in a region that has been plagued by military coups, civil war, authoritarian regimes, and Islamist terrorism for decades (A.B. Diop 1992; Villalón 1995).<sup>3</sup> As I am writing these words in April 2024, Senegal's democracy has just gone through a tumultuous time. The image of Senegal as a democratic beacon of hope in the West African region was first shaken when, on 3 February 2024, then President Macky

<sup>3</sup> The idea of Senegal as a rare democracy in the Sahelian region has also been criticised. See Villalón (2010, footnote 9) for a brief critique of the idea of Senegalese exceptionalism. Senegalese politics has been marked by clientelism and the authoritarian tendencies of its leaders (Dahou and Foucher 2004), and limits to press freedom and weak rule of law (Freedom House 2023).

Sall announced that the elections that had been scheduled for 25 February, would be postponed by ten months. Sall explained the necessity to postpone the elections due to the insecurity and instability of the political situation, but the opposition was furious about this “constitutional coup,” arguing that this was an attempt of Sall to maintain power in his camp (Toto 2024). Protests broke out all over the country, in which at least three protesters were killed (TV5 Monde 2024). Large parts of Dakar, the Senegalese capital, were subsequently cut off from the internet to avoid more rallies. These were not the first protests of citizens against the deterioration of democracy in the country. According to Amnesty International, at least 60 protesters had been killed in political protests in Senegal between March 2021 and March 2023 (Amnesty International 2024). Human Rights Watch have reported an increase in politically repressive practices over the last couple of years, including arbitrary arrests of political opposition figures and journalists, the excessive use of force by security forces during civic protests, and the shrinking of civic space as a result of the adoption of new laws that increase the government’s abilities to dissolve associations, trade unions, and political parties (Human Rights Watch 2024).

The political crisis was not new. Opposition against President Macky Sall’s rule had been growing for a while, and the suggestion that he might run for a third term as president had led to strong opposition since March 2021. While Sall has successfully positioned himself as a leader in the international political arena, his legitimacy in Senegal has remained contested (Brossier 2021). People were frustrated by Sall’s selling of Senegalese land and natural resources to foreign companies and fed up, furthermore, with what they regarded as empty democratic promises (B. Ndiaye 2022; Popiviciu 2024). The critique around the state of the Senegalese democracy reached new heights when the very popular opposition candidate Ousmane Sonko was accused of rape in 2021. Sonko had risen to fame as a tax inspector for his fierce critique on the corruption of the political regime. His vision to centre national interests to boost the Senegalese economy had made him a popular candidate, particularly among urban youth, who had not seen their economic perspectives improve over the last years, and who continue to face high unemployment levels (Hammerschlag 2023). In February 2021, Sonko made headlines when Adjii Sarr, a young employee at a massage salon, accused him of having raped her. Sonko admitted to being a regular visitor of the salon, but he denied the rape accusations, arguing that it was a political conspiracy by Macky Sall to get rid of him.

When the National Assembly voted to remove Sonko’s parliamentary immunity on 26 February 2021, investigations into the accusations came in full swing (Soumaré and Faivre le Cadre 2021). News about the investigations dominated the media for weeks on end, and they developed into violent manifestations after Sonko was arrested. At least ten people were killed in these protests (Human Rights Watch 2021). The widespread

idea that the Sonko-Sarr case was a political conspiracy cooked up by Macky Sall to get rid of his strongest opponent, revealed a low trust in the integrity of the president, and of politics in general (Hendrickson 2021). In the public debate, Adjii Sarr's lawsuit was largely dismissed, and comments ranged from accusations that she was getting paid to "act" in a Macky Sall-led conspiracy, to the suggestion that, as an employee of a massage salon, she was a "prostitute," and so she supposedly could not have been raped (C. Kane 2023). In June 2023, the case found closure. While Sonko was not found guilty of rape, he was sentenced to two years in prison for "*corruption de la jeunesse*" (F: corruption of youth) – an offence in the Penal Code that punishes the (incitement to) debauchery of persons under the age of 21 (Ba 2023).<sup>4</sup> This already put at risk his chances to compete in the presidential elections, but when he was additionally judged for jeopardising public security and inciting an insurrection, he was eventually barred from candidacy.

From prison, Sonko put forward his colleague tax inspector and co-initiator of the political party Pastef (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité, also referred to as Pastef Les Patriotes), Bassirou Diomaye Faye, as a presidential candidate. In the political turmoil of February and March 2024, when the Constitutional Court had rejected Sall's decision to postpone the elections until after the end of his presidential term, Sall introduced a – controversial – amnesty law that freed a number of (political) prisoners, including Ousmane Sonko and Bassirou Diomaye Faye. On 2 April 2024, Faye was installed as the new president, after having won the elections on 24 March. The campaign slogan *Diomaye mooy Sonko* (W: Diomaye is Sonko) – a creation of the Pastef party to promote Diomaye Faye as the candidate whom supporters of Sonko could safely vote for because he advanced the same political agenda – had been effective, and Senegal had embraced this hitherto unknown candidate. Many people – from citizens to journalists and political commentators – have celebrated Faye's election as a sign of the resilience of Senegalese democracy, and as a promising new turn in Senegalese politics (Ioanes 2024).

Faye's promises to bring an end to Senegal's hyper-presidentialism, and his objectives to improve the living conditions for Senegalese by, among other things, revisiting contracts with foreign companies in the oil and fishing industries, are applauded. Faye has been celebrated as a pan-Africanist who will prioritise Senegalese sovereignty vis-à-vis enduring colonial relations (RFI 2024). But if "Diomaye is Sonko," and Diomaye Faye's plans aligns with those of Sonko, then what can be said about who are included in his democratic promises? On 6 April 2024, the Réseau des Féministes du Sénégal (F: Network of Senegalese

<sup>4</sup> Article 324 of the Senegalese Penal Code punishes with two to five years of imprisonment "Anyone who offends against public morals by inciting, promoting or habitually facilitating the debauchery or corruption of young people of either sex under the age of twenty-one, or, even occasionally, of minors under the age of sixteen."



*féministes*) published a press release to express their concern about the makeup of the new government. Out of 34 positions in Faye's new government – 25 ministers, five secretaries of state, and four members of cabinet – only four are occupied by women. In the days following this news, a number of cartoons and articles appeared that mocked the fact that President Faye and Prime Minister Sonko have as many wives (both have two wives) as they have women in their government. Moreover, the Ministry of Women and Protection of Children has been renamed the Ministry of the Family and Solidarities. By bypassing women for leadership positions and failing to prioritise questions related to women's rights with a dedicated Ministry, Faye's democratic promises fail to be inclusive of half of the population, a collective of more than 250 *féministes* and other civically engaged Senegalese wrote (Senepplus 2024).

Some argue that Sonko is the more provocative of the two, but Faye may be the more conservative. Writing these words at the very start of Faye's presidency, there is still much to become clear in the time ahead. We do know more, however, about Sonko's vision for Senegal, which is characterised by religious conservatism, nationalism, and an investment in so-called traditional Senegalese values. One of the cornerstones of this protection of "traditional" values is a virulent opposition to the supposed imposition of "homosexuality" and what he calls gender ideology in Senegal. Sonko joined the large demonstrations *Non à l'homosexualité* (F: No to homosexuality) in May 2021 and February 2022, where he was announced as one of the politicians who was carrying the fight against "homosexuality" in Senegalese politics. Sonko's claim to protect Senegalese values aligns with the discourse of moral degradation that Islamic organisations have increasingly been propagating in the public sphere over the past years. These organisations, and Ousmane Sonko, participate in the "production of authenticity," a phrase that articulates the desire to preserve supposedly traditional values from being tainted by external influences (Bayart 1996, 85). Former President Macky Sall, on the contrary, has been criticised for being a puppet of France.

Macky Sall's intimate ties with France were at the core of critique on the enduring political and economic influence of the former colonial power. Moreover, the idea that these close relationships have opened the gates to accepting same-sex sexualities in Senegal, reveals how gender and sexuality are a preferred terrain where other debates are being fought out.



A protest sign at the demonstration “Non à l’homosexualité” in Dakar, 23 May 2021. The sign reads: “Macky Sall, you and husband Macron [the French President Emmanuel Macron], Senegal says no to homosexuality.” Photo: Loes Oudenhuijsen.

The attack on Amy Ndiaye, the political tensions around Macky Sall’s presidency, Ousmane Sonko’s popularity, and now Bassirou Diomaye Faye’s election, signal a tense political terrain in which power structures are shifting, and are challenged by both *féministes* and conservative political and religious actors. Despite the parity law, and Senegal’s track record of signing international conventions pertaining to women’s and human rights, women face a backlash when they challenge power. The public responses to the rape trial against Ousmane Sonko and the politicisation of the case reveal how women’s bodies are a political battlefield (Dieng 2021; Gueye 2021).

This dissertation explores how women relate to such public debates, to the moral panics about gender and sexuality that animate these debates, and to the policing of gender norms that results from these panics in Senegal. The past years have seen an increasing attention to female sexualities and “homosexuality” in the Senegalese public

sphere. This putting into discourse of female and dissident sexualities runs against cultural expectations and values of discretion around matters of sexuality, and it signals a growing anxiety with the loss of control over (women's) bodies and sexualities. The intensity of public debates is visible both through events, such as the two large *Non à l'homosexualité* demonstrations that were organised in 2021 in 2022, and through the media attention to particular stories, such as that of the masseuse Adjé Sarr in relation to Ousmane Sonko's trial. Although the intensity of public debates is informative of the sociopolitical context that my interlocutors navigate, these public debates can turn our view away from people's everyday lives. The focus of this dissertation is on women's everyday lived experiences, and on how women shape their lives while navigating public debates and the gender norms and expectations that underlie them.

## Studying “wicked” women

This research seeks to understand how different forms of gender and sexual dissidence come together in the categorisation of “wicked” women. I understand gender and sexual dissidence as those behaviours and practices that challenge or question the dominant Senegalese moral discourse on gender and sex. I use the term wicked as an umbrella for both the different ways in which women in Senegal are judged as dissident, and for the various ways in which women act in response to, or to avoid, such judgements. The term wicked is neither an identity that women adopt nor a collective consciousness of women whose different forms of gender dissidence brings them together in a struggle to dismantle heteropatriarchy. Wickedness deals with the complex relations between norms pertaining to morality, public debates about gender and sexuality, and women's ability to navigate dissent discreetly. “Wicked” is thus the analytical concept that I use to analyse the frictions between these norms, debates, and women's agency. Supposedly wicked women therefore serve as a prism for understanding broader social transformations and shifting meanings of morality, personhood, and agency (Hodgson 2016).

I took inspiration from Hodgson and McCurdy's (2001) edited volume *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, a collection of seventeen essays from different settings in Africa that explores the myriad ways in which women have pushed the boundaries of “acceptable” gendered behaviour. Hodgson and McCurdy make a rough distinction between the quiet endurance and blatant rebellion of women who transgressed the gender norms of their time. This distinction, although in no way absolute, is helpful for understanding the many different forms that women's gender dissidence in Senegal takes, including discreetly enacting same-sex desires, refusing to marry, and vocally contesting particularly gendered values such as *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) and *muñ* (W: enduring, persisting silently in the face of hardship). The term wicked brings together a variety of cases of women whose behaviour has come to be seen as a threat to the social

and moral order. My interlocutors are considered wicked because they, in different ways, challenge gender norms and thereby supposedly jeopardise social reproduction of the patriarchal family and ultimately of the nation (Pierce 2016).

“Wicked” is not a static quality of an individual, and it cannot be defined as just the transgression of a set of rules. When women are considered wicked, this is contextual in the sense that location plays a role in the definition of behaviour as wicked. Particular locations are inherently accommodating of supposedly wicked behaviour, such as clubbing areas and particular night clubs where prostitution is common (Gaudio 2009; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). Other spaces are gendered, and women’s presence in a space that is defined as masculine, like the football field, may lead to discussions about gender norms and women’s supposed dissident sexualities (Adjepong 2020; Ndjio 2022; Packer 2019). These spaces, however, also provide the boundaries within which gender dissidence may be tacitly tolerated (Dankwa 2009). An understanding of how and why women become considered wicked and face stigmatisation from their social environment therefore requires an analysis of women’s interactions with others in these environments. “Wickedness” is furthermore processual. When a woman is considered wicked on the basis of transgressing certain gender norms, she can also regain her respectability by showing adherence to other gender norms, by changing her behaviour, or by finding ways to keep dissident practices a secret.

The main research question that guides this dissertation is: *How do “wicked” women navigate gendered societal expectations and gender panic as they craft their lives?* Drawing upon research conducted with *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night, i.e. who engage in some form of commercial sex), this study analyses women’s agency in a context of gender panic – the broad public concern with women’s unruly practices and sexuality in particular that emerges as social transformations bring about shifts in gender hierarchies and -relations.<sup>5</sup> These three groups of women are perceived as particularly “wicked” in Senegalese society. Despite marked differences in the ways that these groups are positioned in society, these women are all perceived as threats to the social and moral order. Studying three groups of women who are differently positioned in society is useful for an understanding of the different ways in which gender norms and gender panic influence women’s agency: the possibilities and constraints for women to act on their dissident desires.

<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of my choice of terms used to describe my interlocutors, see the section “language and terminology” on page 45 of this introduction.

## **“Wicked” women and gender panic**

Women have always been the targets and objects of moral panics in socially and economically turbulent times, as local and state authorities sought to safeguard the existing political-economic order and their own power therein (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). The concept of moral panics was first coined by Stanley Cohen (1980 [1972]) in a sociological study of youth deviance. He argued that “societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 1980, 9). A particular set of people becomes identified as “folk devils” or scapegoats who supposedly undermine the moral order of society. Characteristic of moral panics is the disproportionality with which the identified scapegoats are held responsible for social upheaval.

Drawing on the term moral panic, Carole Vance (1984) coined the term sex panic to analyse battles over sexuality. Sex panics are a sub-category of moral panic, with particular attention to how moral panics increasingly concern the domain of sexuality (Herdt 2009). Sexuality is a source of anxiety in itself, as well as a political instrument used by political authorities contesting for power (Meiu 2022; Ndjio 2012; Obadare 2015). Other terms, like sex-crime panic and AIDS panic, were subsequently coined as scholars explored the further politicisation of sexuality, its regulation, and public anxieties about sex in the late twentieth century (Rubin 1984; Weeks 1985). Recently, scholars have turned to the concept of moral panics to understand how anxieties about social transformations and shifting gender relations are increasingly expressed through outbursts of homophobia in different contexts (Rao 2020).

Cole and Moore (2020) propose the term gender panic to understand contemporary moral panics in the Global South. They argue that gender panics reveal anxieties about social transformations and the ways in which these have destabilised patriarchal power relations. Hodgson and McCurdy’s (2001) volume *“Wicked” Women* provided examples of gender panics in the colonial and early postcolonial era. This informs us that gender panics are recurring events, emerging in turbulent sociopolitical times when the future of the nation is at stake. In such times, women’s unruly practices and sexuality is seen as a threat to the social and moral order of society. The ways in which women’s bodies in particular have been subject to social and political control is illustrative of the centrality of gender and sexuality as organising principles of societies (Spronk 2012, 61). Gender is moreover essential for understanding sexuality because it “is an essential part of how people understand themselves, and it refers to social understandings and representations of being wo/man” (Spronk 2012, 33; see also Dankwa 2009; 2011; Gaudio 2009; Reid 2013). Transgressions of gender norms often become apparent through sexual acts, as sexuality

is an important terrain through which gender relations take shape. In Senegal, fulfilling gendered expectations depends heavily on (women's) proper sexual conduct: marriage is central for people to achieve adult status, and it is also the only legitimate means through which one can have sex and birth children (Gilbert 2017; Rosenlew 2012). Therefore, gender is a crucial lens through which to analyse questions of sexuality (Tamale 2011a). Although moral panics in Senegal are most visible in their sexualised form, with particular contentions around "homosexuality" and abortion, the broader societal concerns lie with shifting gender hierarchies as a result of social transformations. Therefore I use the term gender panic to explore how *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* are perceived as wicked in a context of anxiety about the future of society.

### **"Wicked" women and agency**

If women risk being considered wicked as a result of their increased autonomy, they also develop agency to respond to their stigmatisation, and to renegotiate their morality and respectability. Such agency should not only be understood in the Western, secular understanding of personal, individual freedom (Mahmood 2001). Agency not only lies in the capacity for progressive change, the subversion of hegemony and increasing individual freedom, but also in the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist within patriarchal norms (ibid.). "There is no agency outside of restrictions," and instead, agency is relational, co-constituted in interactions between people, and dependent on changing positions of power and vulnerability (Diabate 2020a, 19). Agency evolves in a social context and in our relations to others (Utas 2005).

In African studies, the study of agency evolved with studies on the effects of globalisation in Africa, with scholars highlighting the need to study empirical realities in order to understand the uptake and effects of particular processes of globalisation in African societies (Neubert and Scherer 2014). Agency has been conceptualised at the nexus of (changing) structures and people's actions, and agency is understood as the capacity to reflect on, and to renegotiate, this complex interplay between structures and actors (Van Binsbergen 2007; Van Dijk, De Bruijn, and Gewald 2007). In a study of women's agency in Guinea, Ammann (2020) highlights the influence of gender on agency, with gendered norms and gendered morality producing particular forms of action. Ammann studied women's political agency in Guinea, which she defines as a form of "silent politics," as women articulated themselves politically outside of conventional political institutions in an attempt to influence their own lives and those of others, within the bargaining space of gender norms of respectability and morality. This understanding of women's agency resonates with the Senegalese context.

In Senegal, the value of silence is captured in the notion of *sutura*, which signifies “discretion, modesty, privacy, protection, and the happiness that the previous terms are said to ensure” (Mills 2011, 2-3). *Sutura* prescribes people to hide others’ weaknesses and moral flaws. *Sutura* is both a personal attribute and a relational quality. *Sutura* encourages people to maintain silence with regards to discussing sexuality, and in particular same-sex sexuality, publicly and across generations (Gilbert 2017). At the same time, *sutura* is a value and a practice that women can employ to carve out spaces for dissident behaviour without being stigmatised as “wicked” (Mills 2011; Oudenhuijsen 2021b). In addition to *sutura*, women in particular are expected to demonstrate a capacity for *muñ*, which signifies patience and, more concretely “refers to silent and stoic female suffering in the face of hardship or challenges” (Foley and Drame 2013, 128). By quietly enduring certain unfavourable conditions, women maintain their status as respectable. Like *sutura*, *muñ* is a gendered virtue, and women in particular are expected to demonstrate this capacity to endure hardship. A display of these virtues enhances one’s respectability, even if one also engages in dissident behaviour. By refusing to display these feminine virtues of silence and suffering, however, women can become cast as “wicked.”

The absence of open discussions about sexuality in many African contexts is often explained by a “culture of silence” (Arnfred 2004, 73) that supposedly guides behavioural restraint with regards to sexuality. Where such restraint might be read as oppressive through a Western lens, in many African cultures, silence can be as powerful as speech (Tamale 2011a). In fact, different types of silences co-exist: sexuality is often structured through performative, embodied forms, and this embodied knowledge cannot always be translated meaningfully into discourses on sex (Moore 1999). The “putting into discourse of sex” (Foucault 1990[1976], 12) is a particularly Western approach to sexuality that developed in the nineteenth century. In many other contexts, discretion and indirection are culturally important forms of silence, including in Ghana (Dankwa 2009; 2011), Nigeria (Pierce 2007), and Senegal (Gilbert 2017; Van Eerdewijk 2007).

Paradoxically, *sutura* is being challenged by increasingly explicit and overt debates about sexuality in the public domain. In an attempt to stir up gender panic among the population, political and religious actors increasingly address sexual behaviour that, in their view, threatens the moral fabric of society. Analysing the tensions between the moral expectations of *sutura* on the one hand, and increasingly explicit public debate about sexuality on the other hand, is a central concern of this dissertation.



## Situating “wicked” women in the study of gender and sexualities in Africa

This dissertation contributes to the debate on agency by bringing together three groups of women in one study, which reveals the instability and the positionality of agency. By studying ethnographically how *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* navigate gender norms and gender panic as they craft their lives, I relate to three interrelated scholarly debates: African feminist analysis, queer African studies, and studies pertaining to global health and development. These fields have made important contributions to the scholarly debates about gender and sexualities. African feminist analysis has demonstrated the “coloniality of gender” (Lugones 2010) by arguing how colonialism introduced new gender ideologies to societies that historically were also organised around lineage and seniority (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997). African feminist analysis has been pivotal to expanding our understanding of the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality, and how they have led to particular (gendered) power hierarchies (Mama 1997; Tamale 2020). Through these insights, feminist analysis has challenged the notion of a universal experience of womanhood (Dosekun 2020).

For a long time, studies on sexualities, women’s bodies, and women’s sexual pleasure were absent from most African feminist analysis (Hendriks and Spronk 2020; McFadden 2003; Spronk 2012). In the study of sexualities in Africa, colonial-anthropological accounts that described a particularly permissive, excessive African sexuality dominated (Lewis 2011; McClintock 1995; Salo and Gqola 2006; Spronk and Hendriks 2020). In early travel writings and colonial reports, “Africa had become [...] a porno-tropics for the European imagination” and “the quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly” (McClintock 1995, 22). In this imaginary, “women figured as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess” (ibid.). Unbridled (female) sexuality was seen as a threat to public health, and women were perceived to be the primary carriers of contagious diseases such as syphilis (Vaughan 1991). Given this history, some early feminist scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997) and Amadiume (1987) were reluctant to address issues of sexuality, let alone same-sex sexualities, in their work (Mama 1996; Spronk and Hendriks 2020).

The medicalisation of research on sexualities in Africa emerged during colonisation and was informed by Victorian ideals about sexuality and scientific positivism (Tamale 2011a). After colonialism, scholarship and public debates about sexuality continued to focus on problems: studies on female genital mutilation, sexual violence, transactional sex, HIV/AIDS, and homophobia dominated the scholarship on sexualities in Africa (Cornwall, Corrêa, and Jolly 2008; Hendriks and Spronk 2020). When a focus on gender emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the field of development, women were portrayed as victims of men, who rape them or otherwise abuse them (Cornwall and Jolly 2009). Funding streams in this field have informed the research and the interventions that are carried



out, and these have largely focused on managing “risks” (ibid.). The AIDS pandemic is informative in this regard. When AIDS was discovered in Africa in the 1980s, this led to an increase in researchers from the Global North who went to study the spread of the disease in Africa. Concerned with curbing the spread of the disease, groups “at risk” of contracting and spreading HIV/AIDS were identified, which included “sex workers,” migrants, and men who have sex with men (MSM). These so-called key populations were prioritised in public health research on sexualities (Bennett 2017). Most of these studies have been epidemiological in nature, leaving out an exploration of the contexts in which (“risky”) sex occurs (Packard and Epstein 1991). “Sex work” has often been conflated with trafficking, which, in addition to concerns about women being coerced into unsafe commercial sex, has denied women their agency (Ditmore 2008). When women’s agency is denied, and “sex work” is only studied as a problem, researchers cannot appreciate the extent to which women are embedded in their families and other social ties.

Studies of commercial sex in Senegal have shown how the legal regulation of prostitution has led to the categorisation of women according to their status as either registered or clandestine “prostitutes” (Foley 2017; Poleykett 2012, 2016). Foley and Dramé (2013) have drawn attention to the importance of attending to a wider variety of practices that, in addition to the common image of women going out to bars to look for clients, includes the practice of *mbaraan*, which refers to the practice of dating multiple people at once from whom one draws material gifts or money to sustain oneself. Fouquet (2007, 2011), moreover, has highlighted the affordances of commercial sex for women to construct a different life story – one with financial autonomy, which allows women to escape from some forms of social control, and which gives women access to the Western world as they learn about other cultures from *tubaab* (W: white/European person) boyfriends and clients. This dissertation builds upon these studies, which have helped diversify our understanding of commercial sex practices, as I explore how women who engage in commercial sex are firmly embedded in communities of (chosen) kin.

Although much research on sexualities in Africa remains donor-driven and informed by the portrayal of sex as a problem, the scholarship on sexualities in Africa has expanded considerably (Arnfred 2004, 2009), including research on pleasure (Diabate 2020b, 2022; Marais 2019; McFadden 2003; Nzegwu 2010; Spronk 2012; Tamale 2006; Van Eerdewijk 2009), same-sex sexualities (Dankwa 2021; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Gaudio 2009; Hendriks 2016; Otu 2022; Spronk and Nyeck 2021; Van Klinken 2019) and (political) homophobia (Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid 2012; Coly 2019; Nyeck 2013). The work of African feminist scholars like Patricia McFadden (2003) and Sylvia Tamale (2011a) has been pivotal for broadening our understanding of sexualities in Africa. Moreover, the Africa-based journals *Feminist Africa* and *Agenda* have published important work on sexualities since the early 2000s. I draw upon this growing field of studies on sexualities in the field of

African feminist analysis as I explore the, sometimes tense, relations between sexual rights debates and feminism in Senegal.

Senegal has played a key role in feminist scholarship from the African continent, having hosted two important platforms for the production of knowledge on gender in Africa. In 1977, the feminist intellectual organisation Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFARD; in English: AAWORD, the Association of African Women for Research and Development) was established in Dakar, in response to the absence of African feminist voices in international feminist gatherings (Touré-Thiam 2018). Two decades later, in 1996, the Senegalese sociologist Fatou Sow, together with colleagues, initiated a Gender Institute at CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), a pan-African research centre based in Dakar since 1973. The Gender Institute has organised short courses and numerous Gender colloquia over the years (Fall-Sokhna and Thiéblemont-Dollet 2009). Senegalese feminist scholars have signalled the gap between legal rights and social realities in Senegal (Bop 2010). For example, while women's economic contributions to households are often substantial, particularly since the economic crisis of the 1980s pushed women into the economic domain, these have not translated into more legal rights to land and resources (Sarr 1998; Sow 1997). Furthermore, Senegalese feminist scholars have pointed at persisting gender inequalities in the law, and Senegalese *féministes* have been particularly active in advocating for better women's rights under the Family Code (Sow 2005). Female sexualities have been predominantly approached from a perspective of the violation of rights and bodily integrity, including the question of "female genital mutilation" (Ndoye 2018), or from the question of polygyny and marriage (Gueye 2010a; Gueye 2010b).<sup>6</sup> Where women's sexual agency is concerned, the focus is generally on heteronormative, conjugal settings (Gilbert 2017). Recently, Fatou Sow (2023) called upon Senegalese *féministes* and gender scholars to question heteronormativity and to consider gender and sexual diversity in Senegal, even if the current context is hostile to an open discussion of these issues. My contribution to this field of feminist analysis concerns the question of how same-sex sexualities enter the spaces of feminist analysis and activism in Senegal.

Today, there is a budding field of queer African studies. It has significantly shifted the field of studies of sexualities in Africa, but ethnographic work on same-sex desiring women remains scarce. To date, only two monographs have been dedicated to the study of same-sex desiring women in Africa: Zethu Matebeni's (2011) *Exploring Black Lesbian Sexualities and Identities in Johannesburg*, and more recently, Serena Dankwa's (2021) *Knowing Women* about same-sex desiring women in West Africa, are both crucial references for

<sup>6</sup> Although often referred to as polygamy, polygyny is the correct term because it concerns the social institution of men marrying multiple women. Women do not have the same possibility to marry multiple men.

the study of women's same-sex intimacies in Africa, and pivotal to the expansion of the field of queer African studies.

In Senegal, studies on same-sex sexualities have focused almost exclusively on male same-sex intimacies, including: work on social stigma (Niang et al. 2003); *gay* (male) subculture in Dakar (Teunis 2001; Jason Ferguson 2017); the shifting meaning of *góor-jigéen* (W: man-woman) (Broqua 2017); the representation of same-sex sexualities in the media (Mbaye 2021); the social construction of homophobia (Bertolt von Siandje 2021); and the emergence of “the homosexual” in public discourse (Bop 2008; Coly 2019; Mbaye 2018). Men's same-sex intimacies have been associated with “prostitution” and “transactional sex” (Broqua 2009), and its activism developed around, and emerged in the context of, the struggle against HIV/AIDS. In a recent analysis of anti-queer mobilisation in Senegal, the focus remains on the effects on men's lives, too (Posey 2022). It is not only in scholarly work that a significant gap exists between the amount of studies on male and female same-sex desires. In activism, same-sex desiring men dominate, and in African feminist spaces, including the topic of same-sex intimacies remains a challenge (Matebeni 2011).

The developments in these three scholarly fields reveal how women's lives and sexualities are often studied in silos. For a long time, gender research in Africa has avoided studying female sexualities, research on same-sex sexualities has predominantly focused on men, and global health and development research has emphasised problems of sexual health and rights of groups that have been identified in biomedical terms, like “sex workers” and “MSM.” In this study, I bring together three groups of women who are differently positioned in society, and who have consequently often been studied separately. By bringing these women together, this study challenges the compartmentalisation of research. I explore how different acts of dissidence, such as same-sex love, commercial sex, or vocally contesting particularly gendered norms such as *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) and *muñ* (W: enduring, persisting silently in the face of hardship), coalesce and bring about forms of agency whereby the supposed differences between these women are sidestepped. By studying these “groups” together, and showing where their experiences converge and differ, I also challenge Western feminist tendencies to see women from the Global South as a homogeneous group who share the same concerns as white women (Lewis and Mills 2010; Mohanty 1988). Gender intersects with other hierarchies, and a study of gender should always take into account the intersections with, for example, class, race, and sexuality. Particularly at a time when right-wing nationalism and populist rhetoric has appropriated identity politics as a way of pitting groups against one another, undoing the fragmentation of society into isolated, supposedly incompatible identities and groups is crucial (Eng and Puar 2020). Bringing together the experiences of a diversity of women also helps us to understand how different forms of agency emerge, depending on women's social positionalities. Women of all different

walks of life are affected by gender normativity and gender panic. The degree to which they are under scrutiny, and the ways in which their behaviour is judged, differs, however. The stories of my interlocutors reveal the influence of social status, financial autonomy, and embeddedness in communities on the possibilities and constraints for women to live supposedly wicked lives amid gender panic.

### *Féministes*

The first group of women in this study were *féministes*. My *féministe* interlocutors are women who are visible in the public sphere, and who participate in different capacities in public debates about women's rights, gender, and sexuality. At the time of my research, they were aged early thirties to early forties. I met most of them by attending public events that were organised by feminist collectives. Through their work for international NGOs, for civil society organisations, as journalists, or as legal or medical professionals, many of them are regularly invited to join public debates on topics such as gender equality policies and laws. My *féministe* interlocutors had the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) to participate in such debates, with most having pursued tertiary education (cultural capital) and working for large (international) civil society organisations that supported their work (social capital). The cultural capital of my *féministe* interlocutors is informed by, among other things, a rich tradition of women's public and political presence in Senegal. This presence dates back to at least the colonial period, when women like Ndaté Yalla Mbodj, the last Queen of the Waalo Kingdom in the north of today's Senegal, and Aline Sitoé Diatta, a divine authority and anti-colonial fighter from the Southern Senegalese Casamance region, led the anti-colonial resistance against the French (Sarr 2011; Toliver-Diallo 2005). These women remain an inspiration for women in political and public functions today (Riley 2019).

Women have been present in numerous domains of public life, including in positions of leadership in civil society organisations (Sow 1989). The growth of women's rights initiatives in development has increased social and economic opportunities for women, and they have helped to gradually enhance the visibility of women in the public sphere since independence (Bouilly 2018). The presence of women activists in the public sphere in itself is thus not a surprise. Women are expected, however, to show modesty and deference to men and to other women of higher status (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). Women who refuse to do so, and who show that they are independent, risk being cast as wicked.

While higher social status and relative wealth enable people to enact dissident practices because they can afford to live away from their families, or negotiate their position in the family because they provide for kin (Miller 2024, 111-112), with such social status also comes the responsibility to uphold this status by displaying privacy, modesty (*sutura*), restraint, and deference (*kersa*) (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). Hierarchies of caste,

gender, age, and married status are also part of what informs a person's social status, and these factors influence the level of restraint and modesty required (ibid.).

In general, *féministes* can be perceived as wicked for speaking up about questions of gender and sexuality. In Chapter One, I describe the different ways in which people draw upon gender norms, and gender panic in particular, to rearticulate the boundaries of supposed wickedness. In an attempt to stir up gender panic among the population, political and religious actors increasingly address sexual behaviour that, in their view, threatens the moral fabric of society. This context of gender panic affects *féministes*, who risk becoming labelled as *lesbienne* when they speak out in public.

### *Lesbiennes*

The centrality of *sutura* as a factor in delimiting so-called wickedness is profoundly felt by a second group of interlocutors in this study: same-sex desiring women. They largely referred to themselves as *lesbiennes*, and they mostly came from poor socio-economic backgrounds. They were also relatively young, aged between twenty-three and thirty-five years old. They had different levels of schooling and many jobs, but most took on changing jobs, often as street vendors or petty traders. Among them was a group of football players who dreamed of an international career in football, but who, faced with bleak prospects and little to no compensation for their performances in the Senegalese competition, turned to selling clothes, cosmetics, coffee, and other comestibles. Where they had pursued higher education, many could not find a job that matched their qualifications. Whatever job they took on, my interlocutors survived first and foremost because of their networks of family, friends, and lovers.

Serena Dankwa (2021) has argued that when working on (same-sex) sexual intimacies it is incredibly difficult to talk to people of higher social standing, because these women risk losing their higher social status and respectability. In a context of growing public attention to “homosexuality,” it becomes even riskier to speak about same-sex intimacies. In Senegal, furthermore, occasional media “scandals” and generally negative media representation of *lesbiennes* make higher social status women reluctant to connect via organisations or public spaces with *lesbiennes* whom they do not know. From an initial focus on men in expressions of anxiety about the supposed spread of “homosexuality,” *lesbiennes* now increasingly appear in discussions about the alleged moral degradation of society. The context of anti-queer sentiments increases the need for women to craft forms of elusiveness and secrecy to avoid exposure. In Chapter Two, I explore the different ways in which *lesbiennes* (and *ñi génn guddi*, see below) maintain secrecy, and ambiguity, around their dissident practices as a way to create space for those practices, beyond or away from tense public debates.

### *Ñi génn guddi*

A third group of women in this study are *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night). *Ñi génn guddi* is a term that refers to people – in this research women – who engage in some form of commercial sex. Contrary to the pejorative Wolof term *caga* (“prostitute”), or the French terms *travailleuse de sexe / professionnelle de sex* (sex worker / sex professional), which are common in the context of sexual health organisations, *ñi génn guddi* is a discreet way of referring to commercial sex, and it was a preferred term for many of my interlocutors. I met *ñi génn guddi* partly via activities organised by NGOs, but also through snowball sampling from my *lesbienne* networks, some of whom could introduce me to women they knew via NGOs, from going out to bars, or because they had lived with them. In other words, there were multiple links between some of my *lesbienne* interlocutors and *ñi génn guddi* whom I met. They lived in the same neighbourhoods, and they too came from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Their ages ranged, at the time of fieldwork, between 29 and 50 years old.

The Wolof term *caga* is used pejoratively to classify behaviour that threatens societal expectations of *jigéen yu baax* (W: good women). *Caga* means divorced woman, widow, and prostitute simultaneously (J.L. Diouf 2003). It is generally used to refer to divorced women, but in cities today it is used primarily as a synonym, and a slur, for “prostitute.” “Prostitute” has been used as a slur for women who challenge the patriarchal status quo in many contexts, particularly when moving into spaces that are considered male domain (Hungwe 2006). It is a way of identifying a woman as being out of place, and thus of being considered “wicked.” When *caga* is used as a slur to call someone wicked, this does not necessarily relate to a woman’s actual engagement in commercial sex. Defining “sex work” is difficult in a context in which many intimate relationships include some form of economic exchange (Poleykett 2016). Terms like “transactional sex” (Wamoyi et al. 2011) and “survival sex” (Hunter 2002) have been proposed to provide insight into the many different meanings that material transactions may carry in sexual relationships, including the creation of social ties (Swidler and Watkins 2007), subsistence (Kuate-Defo 2004), an expression of love (Cole 2010) and status among peers (Luke and Kurz 2002). Elucidation of the different stakes and emotions that can be involved in these sexual relationships helps to challenge the connotation of immorality and exploitation that the terms “prostitution” and “sex work” carry. The women in my study who fit the rubric of (and who largely self-identified as) *ñi génn guddi*, did engage in commercial sex.

In many ways, the lives of university-educated and formally employed *féministes* are different from those of *ñi génn guddi* and *lesbiennes* in this study. *Ñi génn guddi* may go out at night as part of their strategies for survival, and *lesbiennes* who have never had the chance to go to school and who, after dreaming of a professional football career, now try to make ends meet by selling clothes or cosmetics as street vendors, similarly lack

the financial autonomy and cultural capital that the *féministes* in this study have. The latter were much better off economically, and they often came from families with high social status. This is no surprise, as engaging publicly with questions of women's rights requires significant social and cultural capital. Many of the differences in how women are affected are the result of their different social positionalities. There are also similarities in the ways in which societal expectations sometimes conflict with personal desires, and the ways in which agency takes shape in these interactions. In the next chapters, I explore how different elements of positionality affect women's possibilities and constraints to diverge from gender norms. In the next two sections, I outline Senegalese gender norms and the emergence of gender panic, to provide a background for the subsequent empirical analysis of my interlocutors' agency to navigate gender norms and gender panic as they craft their lives.

## Gender norms in Senegal

Societal ideas about gender and sexuality in Senegal are characterised by an "Islamised gender ideology" (Gueye 2011, 69) that "naturalises, sacralises and consequently institutionalises heterosexuality and its concomitant understandings of gender and gender roles as 'just the way it is'" (Gilbert 2017, 24). Religion has played an important role in the construction of a "Senegalese sexual imaginary" (ibid.). Islam first arrived in Senegal in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but only spread widely starting from the nineteenth century (Seck 2007). The spread of Islam throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consolidated patriarchal values, ascribing above all wifely and motherly duties for women. Some of these patriarchal values were already present in the Wolof, Toucouleur, and Sereer societies of the Senegambia, but they crystallised further with the advent of religious institutions in Senegal. Today, 97.2 per cent of Senegalese are Muslim, and most adhere to one of the four main Sufi brotherhoods (CIA 2019). The four Sufi brotherhoods – the Qadiriyya, the Layene, the Tijaniyya, and the Muridiyya – are among the most influential institutions of civil society in contemporary Senegal (Ross 2008). They advance an Islamic social code that promotes the patriarchal family.

In this religiously informed Senegalese sexual imaginary, marriage and parenthood are regarded as central to people's identities. Particularly women face societal pressure to get married, because it is the only socially accepted union from which families can be built. The Wolof proverb *táaru jigéen séy la* (the beauty of a woman is in marriage) conveys the centrality of marriage to women's social adulthood (Dieng 2020a). Cohabitation without marriage results in the stigmatisation of women in particular, because it is understood as an indicator of promiscuity, and unmarried women ought to be virgins (Van Eerdewijk 2007). The ideal Senegalese woman, moreover, is a modest woman who dresses appropriately (i.e. properly covering the body) and who avoids spending unnecessary

time in public space (Gilbert 2017). Rising levels of education and professionalisation notwithstanding, women are still first and foremost valued for their roles as wives and mothers (Sow 2018). Submission to male authority, and particularly a wife's submission to her husband, is constitutive of this sexual imaginary (Gilbert 2017).

Related to the importance of marriage for attaining social adulthood is the importance of motherhood. Procreation is a divine recommendation, and a profoundly identitarian question, related to the continuation of one's filiation (Gilbert 2017). Women are expected to raise children, and to raise them well. Children are *liggéeyu ndey* (W: the work of the mother). Mothers, more than fathers, are held responsible for the future of their children. If children behave badly, their mother will be blamed. *Liggéeyu ndey* is part of female submission to patriarchal authority, as raising children well is part of the duties of a wife towards her husband. A woman who breaks with these norms arguably breaks with legible womanhood. As much as women are judged for their abidance by these norms, women negotiate and interpret their sexual relations in various ways to uphold their status as *jigéen ju baax* (W: a good woman).

Most of my interlocutors were unmarried, which put them under more scrutiny from family members. Particularly for those women who no longer lived with their parents or wider family, there were concerns about the lack of control over a woman's (sexual) behaviour and behaviour in public that may threaten her and her family's honour. The proverb *liggéeyu ndey añub doom*, which posits that a mother is directly judged for a child's misbehaviour, points at the relationality of honour. In the following chapters, I discuss how my interlocutors take family honour and status into account as they navigate dissident behaviour and societal expectations.

The existence of religiously informed patriarchal gender norms does not foreclose the possibility of lively dissident subcultures. Cities like Dakar and Saint-Louis used to have a lively subculture of sexual and gender dissidents (M'Baye 2013). Michael Davidson (1998) wrote about nightlife in Dakar in the 1950s, where he encountered "boy brothels" where men dressed in women's clothes and hooked up with Senegalese men. He wrote that: "In 1949 [...] Dakar was already the 'gay' city in West Africa. When I returned nine years later [...] Dakar was gayer than ever" (Davidson 1998, 107). And in "The Wolof of Senegambia," part of the "Ethnographic survey of Africa," David Gamble (1957, 80) reported that "life in urban centres is also associated with a decline in morals [...] Homosexuality, practically unknown in rural society, has become established in large towns." Men's gender and sexual dissidence has historically had a place in Senegalese culture through the social category of *góor-jigéen* (W: man-woman). *Góor-jigéen* were effeminate men who performed female social roles at important events such as marriages, funerals, and baptisms. They accompanied *drianké* (women of high social and economic



standing) and political figures (Camara 2007a). Until the 1970s, *drianké* and *góor-jigéen* organised *tànnèbéer* (W: night-time dances), social gatherings where partners could meet each other for both cross-sex and same-sex encounters. These gatherings took place in public spaces, and they were not considered to be a violation of morality (ibid., 155). No specific visibility or attention has been cast on female gender or sexual dissidence in the way that it has been for men, and there is no Wolof term like *góor-jigéen* for women, but this does not mean that such practices did not exist. The history of these practices suggests that lively subcultures existed in tandem with religiously informed patriarchal gender norms. The early post-independence years in Senegal brought about some changes, however, to the ways in which such practices could find a place in society.

### ***Postcolonial transformations of gender norms***

When Senegal obtained independence from France in 1960, its first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, had a mission to develop a modern nation-state, which included tight control over people's sexual behaviour (Biaya 2001). In an attempt to reduce ethnic, religious, and class differences, the government drafted the Family Law, which came into effect in 1972, and which included written rules about matters like marriage, pregnancy, and "appropriate" sexuality (Camara 2007b). The regulation of prostitution is a case in point. Prostitution in Senegal is regulated with the Loi du 24 Avril 1946, a French law passed in 1946 that regulated commercial sexuality in France and in some overseas colonies, including Senegal, as a way to manage hygiene, curb the spread of venereal diseases, and control women's bodies in the public sphere (Poleykett 2012). This law was codified in 1969 (ibid.). While prostitution is legal, its status in the law reveals how the state attempts to regulate the practice. Howell (2009, 231) defined this "regulationism" as "represent[ing] the extension of the state's powers into new social terrain, through a bureaucratic apparatus of disciplinary surveillance." In a similar fashion, Senegal adopted a French law that criminalised "*actes contre nature*" (F: acts against nature, i.e. same-sex conduct). In 1965, the Senegalese Penal Code was introduced. Largely modelled after French legislation, article 319 of this Code punishes same-sex conduct with between one and five years of imprisonment, and a fine of approximately 150 to 2300 euros. The law was seldom applied until 2008, when photos of a supposed same-sex wedding, which had occurred two years prior, were leaked to the press. This marked a turning point in the (negative) public attention to "homosexuality" (Coly 2019).

In addition to legal reforms of the early postcolonial state, economic transformations likewise had an effect on gender relations. In the years immediately following independence, male heads of households had enjoyed the support of the state, and in rural areas, farmers received investments for agricultural inputs. Strong state control over the economy in these years went hand in hand with the consolidation of strong patriarchal authority structures (Perry 2009). From the mid-1980s onwards, however, the liberalisation of

the market put a halt to such investments. In the 1970s, an economic crisis hit Senegal. As a result of increasing external debt service and droughts that affected much of the Sahelian region, the country was subjected to Structural Adjustment Programmes in 1983, which were implemented in much of Africa throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Boone 1990). When the Franc CFA was devalued by fifty per cent in 1994, prices of food, electricity, and transport rose, and particularly small-scale businesses saw their revenues decline (Creevey, Vengroff, and Gaye 1995). The Structural Adjustment Programmes led to a reconfiguration of gender roles, as they resulted in a big disinvestment from the state, pushing women into the public domain as entrepreneurs. This was an economic necessity to contribute to household incomes as men's revenues and opportunities for formal employment dwindled (Sarr 1998). As a result, many women *de facto* became breadwinners in their families (Bop 1995).

With the creation of weekly markets, or *loumas*, in the 1980s, and donor-funded micro-credit programmes to support women's small enterprises, women acquired more autonomy over their work and income (Perry 2005). By establishing *mbootay*, women's associations organised in age-groups, women were able to generate capital to start a business. Women's economic success contributed to challenging gendered power dynamics in society (Sarr 1998), although their access to land and resources remained limited (Sow 1997). The increased visibility of women in the economic sphere moreover did not automatically translate into greater political visibility and power (Sow 1989). Although women may contribute to the household income significantly, they are still primarily valued for their domestic behaviour: women who work in the public sphere are understood to "*travailler*" (F: work), whereas their work in the household is understood as "*bien travailler*" (F: working well) (Adjamagbo, Antoine, and Dial 2004).

The economic malaise of this period coalesced with new religious movements and alliances with other Muslim countries. The liberalisation of politics and the economy in the 1980s aided the emergence of religious reformist movements. In 1981, Senegal officially became a multi-party democracy, although the first democratic change from one political party to another only happened in 2000 when Abdoulaye Wade was voted into power. With the gradual liberalisation of the media in the 1980s and 1990s, reformist moral discourse had gone mainstream. Religious groups saw their potential influence through their appeal to the masses of the population who identify as Muslim, and they took advantage of this demographic reality to influence the public debate. Their public presence via formal schooling, strong media presence, and popular preaching, has allowed them to shape public debates via three main objects of criticism – the West, state secularism, and moral decadence (Idrissa 2017). Reformist moral discourse attributed responsibility for social evils like prostitution, thievery, and corruption to Western moral decadence that had gradually seeped into Senegalese society, not least through its adoption of state

secularism after independence (Piga 2006). Sufi brotherhoods continue to dominate the Senegalese religious sphere, and they have remained politically aligned with the state, but ideologically they have adopted much of the moral critique of reformists (ibid.).

These new reformist movements have put the question of the idea of Senegalese cultural identity and citizenship on the agenda, and they have brought new practices and discourses around sexuality into the public debate (Mbaye 2018). With the spread of these moralising discourses, cultural practices of gender dissidence have been put under a magnifying glass. Practices including cross-dressing during *Tamxarit*, the celebrations of the Islamic new year, have disappeared from urban sites. Likewise, the social roles of *góor-jigéen* (W: man-woman) during baptisms, weddings, and funerals have been erased, and their gender transgression has become equated with male homosexuality (Broqua 2017). These subcultures and cultural practices of gender and sexual dissidence have made way for panic about the supposed moral degradation of the country as a result of allegedly foreign behaviour (ibid.).

## Gender panic and media “scandals” in Senegal

Over the past decades, “homosexuality” in particular has become an issue of increasing political and public concern in Senegal. Homosexuality emerged as a theme in public debates in the course of the 1980s, instigated by religiously oriented publications such as those of the NGO Jamra and the daily newspaper *Walfadjri* (Mbaye 2016). Known for its active role in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and publishing under the same name since 1978, Jamra “is concerned primarily with moral and educational issues including prostitution, alcoholism, drug problems and homosexuality,” which “are interpreted as the result of secularism and decadent Western influences” (Rosander and Westerlund 1999, 93; see also Bâ 2005).

Since 2008, media have regularly reported on so-called gay marriages, and 2008 is considered to be a turning point in “the invention of the homosexual” in Senegal (Coly 2019). The first widely mediatised “gay marriage scandal” in Senegal was in 2008, when the Senegalese tabloid *lcône* published photos of an alleged gay marriage that had taken place in 2006. As a result, a number of men were arrested, and others fled to neighbouring countries. The event instigated a witch-hunt against gender non-conforming individuals, and it signalled a turning point in the public discourse on “homosexuality” in Senegal (ibid.). The “gay wedding” as a sign of the supposed penetration of Western decadence has appeared in other countries too (see Biruk 2014 on Malawi; Gaudio 2009 on Nigeria). A couple of years later, media occasionally started expanding their attention to “lesbianism,” with a “scandal” following an alleged sex tape and later a “scandal” that led to the first trial of five women who were accused of “lesbianism” after they had been arrested in

a bar. Media have played a big role in the negative representation of “homosexuality” in Senegal (Coly 2019; Mbaye 2021). In addition to eagerly disseminating news of such “scandals,” there is a growing presence of *oustaz* (Muslim scholars) in television talk shows and on radio shows, where they spend much time commenting on “*faits divers*” (F: miscellaneous facts), from alleged sex “scandals” to other questions of sexual and family morality. Cases of rape, murder, or violence between co-wives, sex tapes, and alleged gay weddings are regularly recurring items that are presented to moralise the public about the dangers of a supposed moral degeneration of society and a loss of so-called traditional Senegalese values.

In an attempt to understand virulent anti-queer rhetoric and (legal) action in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, in contexts where sexual rights activism remains limited, Steven Pierce argues that the anxiety around supposedly “gay weddings” is the result of a combination of forces: “religious homophobia, global paradigms of sexual orientation, sociopolitical crisis, and the emergence of communities potentially recognizable as homosexual are the conditions of possibility for contemporary events” (Pierce 2016, 5). He argues that economic crises underlie concerns about sexual immorality, as young people’s choices of sexual and romantic partners, independent of their parents’ considerations, signal a crisis of social reproduction. With youth’s independent partner choices, the reproduction of prosperity within families is threatened, which has been dependent on families contracting marriages for children as a way of securing economic support. Anxieties about social reproduction are displaced onto youth whose supposed sexual immorality, as seen from ubiquitous reporting on prostitution and same-sex sexuality, is understood to reflect the ailments of contemporary society (*ibid.*).

The virulent anti-queer sentiments that circulate in public debates in Senegal since the late 2000s are exemplary. Recent calls by political and religious leaders to uphold so-called traditional values have included a law proposal to further criminalise same-sex sexualities in Senegal. On 12 December 2021, a collective of 125 religious associations, *And Samm Jikko Yi* (W: Together for the preservation of our values), led by imam Ababacar Mboup, announced that they had prepared a modification of the law that criminalises same-sex conduct (Mbaye 2022). The law proposal intended to define, and subsequently penalise with harsher prison sentences, sexual and gender identities. Unlike similar law proposals in Ghana and Uganda, this proposal was unsuccessful. It was rejected by parliament on 25 December 2021, arguing that same-sex sexualities are already criminalised by law. The project shows how religious and political figures are involved in the appropriation, and modification, of globally circulating discourses of gender and sexuality (Ollivier 2021). Where the Senegalese penal code currently criminalises “unnatural acts,” the new law proposal project made explicit mention of LGBTQI+, and spelled out the different gender and sexual identities.



<sup>^</sup> Demonstration "Non à l'homosexualité," 20 February 2022, in Dakar. The sign reads: "Ànd Sàmm Jikko Yi, departmental section of Kaolack. Kaolack demands the stop of the pro-LGBT agenda that is rolled out in Senegal and demands the criminalisation of homosexuality." Photo: Loes Oudenhuijsen.

< Roadside poster, 5 January 2022. The poster reads: "A.S.J And Sàmm Jikko-Yi. Yes to the criminalisation of homosexuality. Subscribe at: 776515114." Photo: my interlocutor Nguenar.

The law project fits in a tendency of conservative political and religious forces in Africa that are mobilising against so-called gender ideology that challenges the heteropatriarchal status quo (Awondo, Bouilly, and N'Diaye 2022). Gender and sexuality are at the heart of postcolonial tensions, while paradoxically reifying a heteropatriarchal order that emanated from colonial ideology (Tamale 2020). A contraction of heteronormativity and patriarchy, heteropatriarchy refers to the political, economic, and social dominance of heterosexual men over other groups in society (Kelley and Arce-Trigatti 2022). Heteropatriarchy normalises and naturalises male dominance, gender binaries, and heterosexual identities and relationships. Senegalese political and religious authorities are active in a process of “heteropatriarchal recolonisation,” a process whereby “the state can produce a group of nonprocreative noncitizens who are objects of its surveillance and control, —subjected to its processes of normalization and naturalization that serve to veil the ruses of power” (Alexander 2005, 25). The law is instrumental in such a process, as it defines non-citizens (sexual outlaws) through elaborations of older, colonially inspired, laws against “unnatural acts.” The anti-queer sentiments that appear from efforts such as the law proposal may expose same-sex desiring persons to more stigma and violence, similar to the way in which the continuous negative media portrayals of same-sex desiring persons have led to an increase in violence against them (Mbaye 2016). Sexual rights organisations are under scrutiny too, for supposedly recruiting youth and promising them money and the possibility of migration to Europe. Increasingly, *lesbiennes* have appeared on the radar of conservative actors who have started warning the public that *lesbiennes* had largely been overlooked until now, which has led to a substantial increase of *lesbiennes* in Senegal. Anxiety is directed at schools, among other spaces, where young, innocent adolescents are allegedly lured into same-sex practices (Dankwa 2021). For example, in April 2019, a video went viral of two high school girls kissing. The girls had someone film their playful kissing, who then forwarded this to their network via a WhatsApp status update. People sharing the video added texts like “all girls have become lesbians” and “Senegal is doing bad.” Senegalese media wrote about the affair and the Islamic organisation Jamra was quick to accuse the country’s only known organisation for same-sex desiring women of promoting “lesbianism” in the country. This case demonstrates how, in the public sphere, authorities (religious or other) may call upon morality to denounce all forms of sexuality that threaten the heteronormative, patriarchal order (Epprecht 2008).

Although anti-queer sentiments take centre stage in public debates about gender and sexuality in Senegal today, the question of the legalisation of abortion has likewise generated anxiety. Opposition to women’s activism for the right to abortion has included the circulation of conspiracy theories about a master plan to reduce African populations by putting a halt to biological reproduction, either through abortion or through same-sex “marriage.” Hannaford (2017) links such gender panic in Senegal, which is directed largely



at women's bodies, to the high emigration rates of mostly men. She argues that the talk about women's infidelity is disproportionate in relation to actual figures of infidelity, abortion, and infanticide, and that it is "a way of displacing other kinds of fears about social reproduction in the wake of the 'ruptures' of migration" (ibid., 81). The problems and uncertainties associated with socio-economic transformations are displaced onto women's bodies, who become blamed for social ills.

The supposed spread of commercial sex practices is one such "social ill" that young women in particular are blamed for. In addition to alarming the public about a supposed spread of same-sex practices, media likewise contribute to spreading anxieties about the alleged spread of commercial sex practices among young women. In an interview between the Senegalese scholar Rama Salla Dieng and two young Senegalese *féministes* for *Africa is a Country*, they referred to a frontpage headline in *L'Observateur*, one of the largest daily newspapers in Senegal, which stated: "Object of all desires: the iPhone makes Senegalese women lose their minds. They are ready to sell their body for an iPhone" (Thior and Pouye 2020). In such representation, women are accused of increasingly resorting to all sorts of immoral vice to obtain material wealth. Women in particular are accused of greed and their willingness to put aside any concerns about their morality, and men are not equally policed for their behaviour.

If attempts at controlling women's bodies are nothing new, the inescapable presence of (social) media has, however, intensified public debates. In a study on women's transgressive identities, Awa Diop (2012) argued how the proliferation of media has taken certain events, like *sabar* dances, out of their context, which causes them to be viewed as scandalous. *Sabar* is the name for a variety of dances that are performed at the rhythms of *sabar* drums. There are many different variations of *sabar* dances, some of which are particularly sexually suggestive. *Sabar* dances represent an arena of female control, even if men are present as drummers and spectators (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). *Sabar* dances used to be performed particularly by married women who gathered among themselves. The intimacy of the homosocial settings that they created allowed them to exchange secrets, discuss family conflicts, and share their bodily assets through dance (ibid.). Although *sabar* dances have been part of semi-public events like weddings and baptisms, they never went "viral." Today, however, such events are increasingly filmed and shared via social media, which brings the risk that such performances are taken out of context, reaching unintended audiences (A. Diop 2012) and being misinterpreted by ignoring the cultural frameworks within which these dances take place (Gueye 2011). It is the concern with young women's increasing autonomy and confidence in the public domain that leads to strong judgements about supposedly unrespectable dancing forms (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). The mediatization of such "scandals" contributes to the intensification of public debates about morality, and it feeds a discourse about the supposed sexualisation of

youth and the moral deprivation of the country. In such a context, it is important to understand how supposedly wicked lives unfold, change, expand, or contract. To do so, I have taken an ethnographic approach to this research.

## **Research methodology**

This dissertation draws upon ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Senegal between 2020 and 2022. The geographical focus of this research is urban Senegal, and I conducted fieldwork in three urban centres. Urban areas and borderlands have always been attractive for so-called wicked women because of the ethnic, religious, and class diversity found in these spaces (Gaudio 2009). This heterogeneity gives rise to a plethora of sexual, social, and economic opportunities to deviate from the gender order (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001).

The research for this dissertation was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan was to conduct a full year of fieldwork in Senegal, starting in January 2020. Within two months I found myself back in the Netherlands. The university recalled all staff and students who were abroad to the Netherlands, following the partial lockdown that the Dutch government had announced a couple of days earlier. After a couple of months at home in lockdown, borders within Europe slowly opened up again in the summer of 2020. Wanting to move on with fieldwork, my supervisors and I decided that I could do some fieldwork with Senegalese living in Paris. In July 2020, I spent a couple of weeks in Paris with Yacine, her friends, brother, and some cousins. That same summer, she had planned to go to Senegal to secretly marry her girlfriend. I decided to join her as soon as the Senegalese border was reopened. I write about Yacine's wedding party in Chapter Two. The possibilities to conduct fieldwork remained scarce until my last three-month period of fieldwork in early 2022. Despite the delays that COVID-19 caused, I was able to conduct a substantial amount of fieldwork. I spent nine months in Senegal between 2020 and 2022, and this fieldwork was preceded by six weeks of preliminary fieldwork and Wolof language classes at the end of 2019. Because of my previous research in Senegal for my MA thesis on young women's same-sex intimacies (Oudenhuisen 2018), I was able to work with a couple of women whom I had known since 2017, and I could build on the networks I had previously established to meet new people.

The nature of this research required me to take the time to build relationships of trust with people. Participant observation was therefore a crucial method in this research. Taking the time to live with women allowed me to get introduced, slowly but surely, to different facets of their lives. My research consisted primarily of participant observations and the ensuing informal conversations with the women whom I met on the football field, at parties, at activist workshops, and in the homes and some public spaces where



women gathered together. I conducted in-depth interviews with women with whom I built such relationships of trust. I conducted interviews with 36 individual women, and I did follow-up interviews with 30 of them. I only recorded the interviews with nine women, as well as two interviews I had with men. Some of the interviews were recorded on the insistence of interlocutors who were certain that I would forget the most important details if I did not do so. Often, however, recording an interview was impossible because it disturbed a sense of security and informality, which was essential to avoid drawing too much attention from curious housemates or family members. Others were reluctant to have their voices recorded because they feared that their voices might end up in the wrong hands: the ubiquity of “scandals” after leaks to the press had made people fearful.

The interviews built on what I had learned in initial meetings and conversations. In interviews, I reflected with women on the situations and stories we had witnessed together, and from these situations, we slowly connected these to earlier moments in their lives which had led them to these contexts and relationships. These stories eventually led me to asking women about their trajectories from childhood to adolescence. With some women, I also reflected on broader practices or developments in their social worlds. These interpretive discussions were very insightful for a better understanding of how their lives were impacted by the sociopolitical context. I mostly wrote extensive notes of interviews immediately after a meeting. When I returned to the Netherlands after a last period of fieldwork in 2022, I manually coded my data, both fieldnotes and interview transcriptions. Analyses of these data partly preceded this coding, however, happening at many moments throughout the ethnographic research, which is “processual and iterative in nature” (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), especially given the disjointed fieldwork as a result of the pandemic. I analysed my fieldnotes and interviews inductively, looking for emerging themes that cut across the data.

In addition to interviewing *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi*, I interviewed a number of professionals who have been involved as researchers or practitioners in fields related to women’s rights and lives. These interviews have helped me to understand women’s biographical narratives in a broader perspective, and to link them to public debates about gender and sexuality. I interviewed an anthropologist who conducts research for NGOs on topics related to women’s rights, a judge who worked for the court in one of the urban centres where I conducted my research, and an employee of a *boutique de droit* (F: law cabinet) of the Association des Juristes Sénégalaises (the Association of Senegalese Women *Juristes*, AJS).<sup>7</sup> During two three-month fieldwork stays, I lived with

<sup>7</sup> The French term *juristes* in Senegal encompasses a variety of professions and functions in the legal domain. See Scales-Trent (2010, 120-122) for an elaboration on the different educational and professional trajectories of *juristes* in Senegal.

Nafissatou, who became a principal interlocutor and gatekeeper in this research.<sup>8</sup> Her long-standing engagement with research and advocacy for (*lesbienne*) women in Senegal was invaluable to how I developed as a researcher during this time. She introduced me to countless women, and, in the case of one of them, Mame Diarra, she assisted in the three interviews I conducted with her, translating between Wolof and French. I had taken Wolof classes in 2019 and 2020 to be able to interact better with interlocutors who did not speak French, including Mame Diarra. As my Wolof language skills progressed, I conducted more interviews with women in Wolof whom I encountered later on in my fieldwork, in 2021 and 2022. I never mastered the language to such an extent, however, that I could conduct long, in-depth interviews by myself. Throughout my dissertation, whenever I provide quotes of my interlocutors, I first write them in the language they spoke, after which I provide an English translation. To indicate the language in which words were initially uttered, I use an F for French and a W for Wolof.

### *Ethics*

When engaging with a study of gender and sexualities in an African context, a reflection on the dominant representations of sexualities in Africa is imperative for ethical research practices. Given the context of gender panic, the question of how to conduct research ethically without putting interlocutors, or myself, at risk is crucial. By discussing media “scandals” in combination with ethnographic material, there is a risk of exposing interlocutors. Awareness of these risks requires a careful research approach and ways of anonymising interlocutors. To protect my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms. Moreover, I omit specifying the city in which interlocutors live, when it was not the large capital city of Dakar. In some cases, however, such measures are not enough to avoid people from possibly being identified. In order to avoid identification of my interlocutors on the basis of media “scandals” such as those that I refer to in Chapter Four, or the anti-feminist, anti-abortion video that I refer to in Chapter One, I resort to the unconventional choice of occasionally omitting the sources that I refer to. I also paraphrase the articles where I quote them, so that they are not directly traceable.

The risks notwithstanding, for various reasons it is important to conduct research on gender and sexualities in Africa. Until today, there is limited research on same-sex sexualities in Africa. Much of the knowledge is developed in NGOs and policy research that engage with questions of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The language of sexuality in Western human rights interventions “produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (Massad 2007, 163). Echoing this idea of privileging, or bringing into existence, a particular understanding of (same-sex) sexualities, Dankwa (2021, 148) argues that the focus of global sexual rights initiatives

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym.

on gay men has meant that other forms of “queer resistance” that are unintelligible with discourses about gay rights, including women’s forms, have been ignored. This leaves a lacuna in our understanding of the lives of same-sex desiring women. To expand the academic knowledge of women’s same-sex lives in Africa, Serena Dankwa argued at the African Studies Association of Africa Conference in Cape Town in April 2022, researchers from outside of Africa also need to study same-sex sexualities in Africa.

Stella Nyanzi echoed this call at the European Conference on African Studies in Cologne in June 2023, when she called upon European scholars to study “queer lives” in Africa, and in Uganda in particular. It was a heartfelt cry, just days after Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni had signed the new “Anti-Homosexuality Act,” harshly expanding the already existing anti-queer legislation. One of the consequences of the new bill is that the academic study of same-sex sexualities has become criminal too, punishable with twenty years of imprisonment (The Republic of Uganda 2023). For very good reasons, there are thus few local researchers who study same-sex sexualities, in Uganda but also elsewhere in Africa. Even where same-sex sexualities are not as severely criminalised as in Uganda, societal disapproval of (the study of) same-sex sexualities can impede research from being conducted. Furthermore, academics based at African universities often lack institutional support for embarking on such studies.<sup>9</sup> Scholars outside of the continent should use the relative freedom that they have to study, in an ethical manner, same-sex sexualities compared to colleagues based in Africa to advance the knowledge production about sexualities in Africa.

In order to do justice to the variety of experiences of dissident lives in Africa then, and not just those pertaining to anti-queer violence, ethnographic research is important. Instead of understanding so-called wicked women as victims of patriarchy and heterosexism only, this study diversifies our understanding of women’s lives by attending to the many ways in which they have shaped, and continue to shape, their own lives.

### ***Positionality***

Academic research takes shape through the encounters between researchers and their interlocutors and field sites. The knowledge that is created is therefore always situated (Haraway 1988) and partial (Strathern 1991). Broad acknowledgement in anthropology of the situatedness and partiality of knowledge production has made reflexivity about one’s positionalities an important aspect of ethnographic research. Such reflexivity is

<sup>9</sup> When Rachel Spronk and S.N. Nyeck set out to compile a Special Issue for the journal *Africa* titled *Frontiers and Pioneers in (the Study of) Queer Experiences in Africa*, their goal was to collect mainly contributions from African scholars based in Africa. They received eleven proposals, of which the majority (eight) could not be written in the end. All of the Africa-based scholars had to withdraw, many for a lack of institutional support, which made it impossible to write an article in addition to their teaching load and research on more “respectable” topics.

both ethically and epistemologically imperative, as our different positionalities impact the way we can do our fieldwork, the relations we construct with interlocutors, and the knowledge we produce in these interactions. Too often, however, Kulick and Willson (1995, 13) argue, reflexivity in anthropological accounts amounts to “reflecting on others only as a means of talking about the self.” They posit that such self-revelatory reflexive accounts do little to challenge the epistemological basis of ethnographic knowledge production. Instead, ethnographic reflexivity should demonstrate a “fractured self” (as opposed to a whole, self-authoring self) that is partial and contingent upon relationships with others. Or, according to Haraway (1988, 586), such an understanding of our positionalities in research allows us to “join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.”

While I can partly explain how I established certain connections with interlocutors as a result of a shared experience of sexual dissidence, a proximity in age, or alternatively, my status as a foreign, white researcher, these identities cannot fully account for the connections and disruptions that occurred throughout the research. Being a foreigner was an advantage, as women did not fear that I would participate in gossip or scandal-creation. Moreover, because of my unrelatedness to their families, they did not fear that the stories they shared with me would end up in the wrong hands. Being Dutch was particularly helpful in this research on dissident sexualities: women were well aware that, in the Netherlands “everything is legal,” as some would say, and that discussions about (same-sex) sexualities occur relatively openly. My age (under thirty) and status (unmarried) made it easier to connect with the majority of my interlocutors who were themselves under or just above thirty and unmarried. It probably also prevented me from connecting with older women, however, for whom sharing details about their intimate lives with a young woman was considered inappropriate.

Margot Weiss (2020, 1358) argues that fieldwork is characterised by intimate encounters that cannot be captured by an understanding of intimacy as “sex *in* the field,” and that instead, we should see “sex *as* a field.” This field contains all those connections and entanglements with our interlocutors beyond neat categorisations or identities. Looking at intimate encounters in the field beyond sex might help to disrupt the hierarchies between subject and objects, between those who know (the researcher), and those who become known (the supposed “other”) (ibid.). The intimate relationships that I developed with interlocutors included my relationship with Nafissatou who became a mother for me, and Fadiga who grew to call me her sister. The kinship terminology that they used to refer to our bonds as we grew closer over time reflected the relational dynamics in the same-sex networks that I was studying. Becoming part of these kin networks was part of learning about these networks and becoming familiarised with the social obligations that characterise them. The bonds that I developed with interlocutors also revealed different forms of intimacy that we shared. With Nafissatou, I shared an intellectual

desire to know more about *lesbiennes* in Senegal, and an intimacy of thinking alongside her about the forms of sociality among *lesbienne* networks in Senegal. We also shared an engagement towards providing support for women who faced exclusion from their families and who were in need of material and emotional support.

These close bonds that I developed in the field were not free from tensions. I could not escape the conflictual dimensions that also characterise kinship bonds. Indeed, tensions were inevitable, partly because of some naiveté on my part – thinking I should maintain “good” relations with everyone – and partly because I could not always separate myself from relational dynamics as if I were only a researcher who was observing “them.” The “participant” in participant observation also means having to deal with tensions, some of which you may have generated yourself.

In addition to colliding with the wish to maintain “good” relationships with people, my desire to know sometimes clashed with others’ desires for our unfolding exchange. Elsewhere (Oudenhuijsen 2021a), I have described how it was particularly difficult to establish my position as a researcher in the bars in which I conducted my research. Bars are particularly sexualised spaces, and my presence there at one o’clock in the morning did not help to establish my position as a researcher. Desires to become romantically involved with me were not only informed by sexuality, but also by race and class – the assumption that, as a wealthy European woman, I could secure a visa made me a desirable acquaintance for some. Without downplaying the authority of researchers in the research process, and the large wealth and mobility inequalities between researchers and interlocutors, power should not be assumed to be only and always held by researchers (Grenz 2005). The relational and shifting nature of power meant that my interlocutors also had power over the course of the research. They decided if and how to respond to my requests or questions, and depending on their perception of my role and the sense, or senselessness, of my research, they responded differently in the exchanges that we had. Therefore, participant observations and the ensuing conversations with women often proved to be much more valuable than interview appointments. In addition to the fact that interviews were difficult to organise, given the limited privacy that women enjoyed in their homes or other spaces in which we could meet, the unfamiliarity for most of my interlocutors with such set-ups could work unfavourably for the flow of an interview.

Sometimes, women made it crystal clear that an interview was in my interest only, not in theirs. With Mame Diarra, this led to funny negotiations on the nature of our exchanges. Mame Diarra was a 50-year-old woman whose house and the care she provides there for other *ñi génn guddi* and *lesbiennes* is central to my analysis in Chapter Three. Planning time for an interview with her was difficult, as she often had other things on her mind when I saw her, or she was simply tired after a short night’s rest. One day,

Nafissatou had summoned Mame Diarra for an interview after we had lunch together. Despite an animated conversation that we had with another one of her friends who was with us, Mame Diarra expressed boredom at the thought of a lengthy interview. She was also impatient to go home and prepare for work. After a difficult period because of COVID-19 restrictions – a curfew had been in place in urban centres in Senegal for a couple of months – Mame Diarra was now eager to get back to work. Nafissatou asked her what price she would ask a client, and Mame Diarra listed her options: depending on the service that a client requested, he would pay between 5,000 and 10,000 FCFA (about eight to sixteen euros). We joked that we would pay her 5,000 FCFA for a session. Nafissatou took part in the interview, both as a translator and an initiator of questions. Because of Mame Diarra's hearing impairment and her lisp, I often had difficulties understanding her. Because Nafissatou knows Mame Diarra's work and family situation so well, her presence and participation enhanced rather than diminished the depth of the interview. We had talked for about an hour when Mame Diarra again expressed the wish to go home. She said that our interview had exceeded the time a client usually gets for 5,000 FCFA. Nafissatou responded to this with "*daanaguma!*" (W: I haven't had an orgasm yet!) She argued that we had paid for an orgasm, not for a specific time. We all laughed, and Nafissatou added: "*Danga daanu ci sa propre piège, Mame Diarra!*" (W/F: You fell into your own trap, Mame Diarra!) "*Oh Ma, doy na!*" (W: Oh Ma, that's enough!) Mame Diarra responded. We did not pay her, but we stopped the interview and when she left a bit later, I gave her some cash to buy cigarettes.<sup>10</sup> Mame Diarra tried to get at least something in return for the time she dedicated to interviews with me.

These connections and disruptions with interlocutors in the field have shaped my research in more profound and messy ways than a disclosure of my sexuality or my gender can account for. Weiss (2020) joined Kulick and Willson (1995) and others who have critiqued reflexivity in ethnography that is identitarian, and she argues that the realisation that we are interdependent with others with whom we create knowledge, brings the obligation to refuse neat identities. Instead, we should "remain in the obligations that we find ourselves responding to" (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012, 83). Such obligations can include the desire to challenge assumptions of so-called wicked women in Senegal as only victims in a heteropatriarchal context, and to challenge assumptions about gender and sexual identities and what they mean for the lives that unfold. With regards to the latter, reminding myself and my audience – other researchers and readers of academic texts in the West – of the indeterminacy of supposed identity categories is a first step. One of the ways in which I have attempted to unsettle assumptions of identity, is through my choice of terminology.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Mame Diarra, 22 September 2020.

### *Language and terminology*

In 2019, a friend alerted me to the text of a young Senegalese artist titled *Je suis lesbienne* (F: I am a lesbian). Intrigued by the courage to publish a text with such a title online – another of her texts was titled *Si j'étais née mec* (F: If I had been born a boy) – I contacted her. Although the text was still online (she has now removed it), Khaïta had stopped performing it a while ago. In the text a woman describes her love for the stage (*la scène* in French, a feminine noun) and the experience of performing on stage. A message that people should love whoever they want was contained in the text, but it was not a coming out story of the artist herself. When she performed the text, it had drawn the attention of various people. A cultural broker in Dakar encouraged her to capitalise on the affordances of *lesbienne* expressions in (Western) NGOs and the cultural events they organise. She later travelled to a European capital for a festival and performed the text there. She hung out with some lesbian women at the festival, who became upset when they found out that she was not a lesbian herself. They told her that she should not perform such a text, and that she should not speak for lesbians if she was not one of them. Feeling confused and uncomfortable about others' insistence on her (not) performing the text, she decided to stop performing it altogether.

With Khaïta, I discussed the complex ideas about what the term lesbian or *lesbienne* (as I will use in this dissertation, a choice that I will elaborate on shortly) signifies. I was intrigued by the European women's conviction that Khaïta should not speak about "lesbians" if she was not one of them. It conveys the idea that "lesbian" is a term with one evident definition and that communicates one way of being, regardless of geographical location. This is a Euro-American understanding of how the terms that people use to self-identify should necessarily carry the same meaning anywhere. The women who had told Khaïta to stop speaking for "them" (i.e. for lesbians) neglected how language and labels travel and take on different meanings in different contexts. Globally circulating terms of gender and sexualities map onto other, local understandings of intimate relationships and erotic self-understandings to alter and diversify the meanings of terms such as lesbian/*lesbienne*. For Khaïta, the sensitivities around the affordances of the term lesbian/*lesbienne* led her to stop performing the text. The discussion added onto already existing tensions on the voicing of sexuality in Senegal, which many see as a Western imposition and a sign of moral decay.

This discussion on the use of the term lesbian/*lesbienne* highlights the necessity to explain my choices for the terms that I use throughout this dissertation because they are neither self-evident nor uncontested. Because the terminology around sexualities comes with particular assumptions regarding sexual identities and political demands for sexual rights, it is important to position myself explicitly in these discussions. Throughout this dissertation, I employ the terms used by my interlocutors to describe their experiences and expressions of gender and sexuality. The mix of Wolof, French, English, and street patois

reveals the ways in which women que(e)ry their urban environment (Oudenhuijsen 2021b). While the term “queer” has been taken up in scholarly and activist initiatives on sexualities in Africa, this uptake has largely occurred in anglophone regions (Dankwa 2021). Like “homosexual” and “lesbian,” the term “queer” reveals a Euro-American understanding of sexuality that often does not accurately describe the realities of same-sex desiring men and women in Africa (Epprecht 2008). This does not mean that people do not adopt terms such as gay, queer, or lesbian, but such identification occurs largely among a younger, urban generation (Ekine and Abbas 2013). The use of such terms demonstrates people’s knowledge of globally circulating debates (Reid 2013), and they can be combined with other emic and etic terms that people adopt from English or other foreign languages into their own contexts (Blackwood 2010; Sinnott 2004; Wekker 2006).

When writing about my same-sex desiring interlocutors, I use the term *lesbienne*, which is a term that they often used for themselves. I write *lesbienne* in French, and thus italicise it, to indicate how their use of the word differs from the globally circulating, Euro-American connotation of the term lesbian. Whereas in the West sexuality has become a prime marker of a person’s social identity (Foucault (1990 [1976])), in many other parts of the world, sexuality is understood as something one does, instead of what one is (Wekker 2006). *Lesbienne* refers to practices rather than to identity, and women often added “*je vis ça*” (F: I live that) when they said that they were *lesbienne*. Identifying as “doing” *lesbienne* does not foreclose sexual relations or marriage to a man, although some of my interlocutors made a distinction between “real” *lesbiennes* and “fake” *lesbiennes* – the latter being those who either already date men currently, or who are expected to leave their female lover at some point to marry a man. While most of my same-sex desiring interlocutors identified as *lesbienne*, they did not always do so. Women may refuse the label because their experiences do not match the negative public media representation of *lesbiennes* in Senegal. Refusing the label *lesbienne* is also a way to ward off any suspicions people may have about your same-sex relationships. Chapter One shows how and why women in football are reluctant to engage, even discreetly, with sexual rights initiatives.

In this thesis, I refer to women who are involved in commercial sex as *ni génn guddi*. This is a discreet way of referring to their work at night, while also allowing for an understanding of “sex work” or “transactional sex” as occurring in relation to other activities that, while not directly income-generating, are also of great support. The friendships and solidarities that are forged in nightlife, among *ni génn guddi*, *lesbiennes*, and “bandits,” provide important sources of social, psychological, and economic support. In addition to referring to themselves as *ni génn guddi*, some women spoke about themselves and others as *travailleuses de sexe* (or the related term *professionnelles de sexe*), which are both terms that are commonly used in sex worker organisations. Women sometimes made a distinction between *travailleuses de sexe* and *clandestines* (F: clandestine “sex workers,”



as opposed to “official,” i.e. registered “sex workers”). This distinction is the result of the earlier-mentioned health system that requires women who engage in commercial sex to register themselves at a health clinic, so that they can go there for regular medical check-ups.

In the same way that I opt for *lesbiennes* instead of lesbians to signal the different understandings that Senegalese women can have of their same-sex desires compared to the dominant Euro-American notion thereof, I also use a French term to describe my interlocutors who identify as *féministes*, which is also to remind readers of the particular forms that Senegalese feminism takes compared to dominant understandings of feminism in the West. I do not, however, italicise the adjective “feminist” or “feminism” in “feminist organisations” or “Senegalese feminism” because such phrases already concern a specific Senegalese, or African, context. It should be noted that all these terms are situated and relational. Women may identify and describe themselves in different ways depending on the context. It is likely that women described themselves as *lesbiennes* to me, a European lesbian, more than they would have used such a term to a male, heterosexual researcher, or among themselves, where gender identifications as *jump* (masculine-presenting) or *sexy* (feminine-presenting) are more relevant as they situate themselves in their social relationships (Oudenhuijsen 2018). The same holds true for *ñi génn guddi*. I largely met them at home, with their friends, which is a context in which they often used the term *ñi génn guddi* as a discreet way of referring to their involvement in commercial sex.

## Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation sheds light on the many different ways in which supposedly wicked women craft ways to live their dissident lives. The book moves between women’s engagements with public debates and representations of gender and sexuality on the one hand, and women’s positioning and repositioning in their own social environments on the other. I explore the different forms of agency that arise in women’s social networks as they navigate gender norms and gender panic, often in conditions of material precarity. In four empirical chapters, I analyse how women stand their ground in relation to discussions about women’s supposed wickedness, whereby the different social positions of my interlocutors shape their agency.

In the first chapter, the focus is on women who have entered the public domain to debate questions of gender and sexuality. These *féministes*, as they identified themselves, are committed to pushing the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable behaviour for women. The chapter revolves around the question of how women’s agency in the public sphere relates to shifting boundaries of supposed wickedness. The gender panic and anti-queer sentiments that conservative actors spread affect women’s agency in the public

sphere. The *féministes* in this chapter possess the cultural and social capital to debate questions of gender equality in the public domain, but they also encounter a backlash from conservative actors.

Because, for most Senegalese women, publicly debating questions of gender and sexuality is neither a possibility nor a desire that they hold, Chapter Two moves the focus from public debates to questions of elusion, secrecy, and ambiguity. In this chapter, I foreground the experiences of *lesbiennes* and *ni génn guddi* as they seek space to live their dissident lives. This chapter asks how elusiveness, secrecy, and ambiguity enable so-called wicked women to craft liveable lives for themselves.

In Chapter Three, I expand this idea of women's craftiness by arguing that this is learned and developed in conjunction with others. I explore how, together, so-called wicked women create and transmit a *savoir vivre*, a knowing how to live, in a challenging urban context. This chapter analyses women's kinship bonds as a site of knowledge production, where a *savoir vivre* is developed and transmitted between women that allows them to build liveable lives. Despite the importance of such social relations and kinship bonds for women to survive together amid economic precarity and societal expectations, their relations are not free from conflict.

Chapter Four analyses how such conflicts can lead to violent exposure and humiliation among *lesbiennes*. In this chapter, I ask how we should understand the prevalence of such violence and exposure among women who are generally so concerned with keeping their relationships a secret. The analysis provides insight into the interactions between anti-queer public debates and women's lives.

Following the assumption that "the particular is a window onto the universal" (Jackson 2017, ix), this study is grounded in the particular experiences of so-called wicked women in urban Senegal. It attempts to shed light on universal questions of agency and sociality as it explores the different forms of agency that emerge as women grapple with the constraints imposed on them by patriarchal structures and misogyny. In the process of navigating heteronormative public debates, family expectations and moral obligations, women cultivate forms of sociality that ground them in social networks that enable them to sustain dissident lives. Studying the lives of gender dissident women offers useful perspectives on how people grapple with, and give shape to, societal transformations. Exploring the shifting articulations between gender panic, gender norms, and women's agency, this study expands our understanding of gender and sexuality studies in Africa through the figure of so-called wicked women.

## **CHAPTER 1**

# **Ceasing *sutura*? *Féministes*' agency in a context of gender panic**

*Ku bëgg wax day gaawa dee*  
(W: The one who likes to talk dies quickly)  
- Nguenar<sup>11</sup>

*Je me demande souvent pourquoi il y a tant de choses que je ne ferais jamais, des libertés que je ne prenne pas. J'admire les femmes qui s'assument, qui assument qu'elles ne veulent pas se marier. C'est pas quelque chose que les gens apprécient entendre d'une femme. J'ai une amie qui le résume ainsi: ku bëgg wax day gaawa dee. Elle veut dire par là que tu ne seras pas remercié.* (F: I regularly wonder why there are so many things that I would never do, freedoms that I do not take. I admire women who make their own choices, who voice that they do not want to marry. It is not something that many people appreciate a woman saying. I have a friend who summarises it as follows: *ku bëgg wax day gaawa dee* (W: the one who likes to talk, dies quickly). By this she means that you will not be thanked.)<sup>12</sup>

*Ku bëgg wax day gaawa dee* refers to the consequences that women bear for speaking up and for going against the gender norms of what is expected of women. Nguenar, who spoke these words, was struggling with the very outspoken positions of some *féministes* in her environment with regards to issues like marriage. Her hesitation, and caution, to enact bold positions are at the heart of this chapter as I explore how women's agency takes shape in the public sphere. Nguenar is one of the *féministes* whom I met at an intergenerational movement-building event of *féministes* in June 2021. She is an unmarried woman in her early thirties who works in the cultural sector. She had been active in feminist associations for a couple of years when I met her. She addressed feminism in her professional work, continuously seeking ways to engage with women and women's perspectives. Growing up in one of Dakar's *banlieues*, she witnessed violence around her from a young age. These experiences inspired her to address violence against women in her activism. This choice was also, however, informed by the fact that this was generally considered a good cause. "*C'est dans le domaine du possible, de ce qui est acceptable*" (F: It falls within the limits of the possible, of the acceptable), she said about this choice. Other topics, primarily those related to sexual and reproductive rights, are not widely considered good causes, and may be publicly critiqued.

In this chapter, I explore how Senegalese women's agency in the public sphere takes shape, and is perceived, in a context of gender panic. Women have accessed public and political spheres in greater numbers in many contexts across the world with the democratisation of politics and the liberalisation of media in the last four decades (Fallon 2008; Gomez-Perez 2018; Walsh 2006). Women's increasing presence in the public sphere

<sup>11</sup> All names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Nguenar, 14 June 2021.

does not, however, mean that their contributions to the debate are always welcomed. Particularly where women question a patriarchal status quo, they often experience a backlash (Cole and Moore 2020). The attack on Amy Ndiaye in the Senegalese National Assembly, which I started the introduction of this dissertation with, is a case in point. When women challenge patriarchal power structures in the public sphere they risk being judged as “prostitutes” (Hungwe 2006) or otherwise as “wicked” women (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001), which serves to delegitimise their contributions. To avoid such stigma, women often carefully navigate gender norms, including expectations of conjugality and motherhood, and they may organise in women-only groups to avoid open contestations with men (Gomez-Perez 2018). Women’s strategies to manoeuvre gender norms with their desires for participation in the public sphere have been variously described as “mobilising without protesting” (Bouilly 2019) in Senegal or as “silent politics” in Guinea (Ammann 2020). Where feminist voices speaking out about sexual violence are given visibility in mainstream media, their messages are often presented as anecdotes, decontextualised from a bigger debate about the gender norms that underlie such violence (Sanger 2010), or it is suggested that these are private matters (Phillips and Cole 2013).

I relate to this literature as I ask what happens when women do decide to speak out. Drawing upon the work of self-identified *féministes* like Nguenar, this chapter explores what the developments of, and responses to, women who do speak out in the public sphere reveal about shifting conceptualisations of “wickedness” in Senegal. The question that guides this chapter is: *What does women’s agency in the public sphere tell us about the shifting boundaries of “wickedness?”* I examine the current context of gender panic to argue how *féministes’* increasing participation in public debates reveals new tensions concerning women’s agency. The constraints to women’s agency in the public sphere and the tensions with regards to the inclusion of sexual rights questions into feminist organising, re-establishes the precipice of supposed wickedness in the current era.

Juxtaposing the stories of a number of *féministes* with considerable cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), with those of women activists in the domain of football, this chapter sheds light on the impact of women’s different positionalities for the possibilities to speak out publicly. Bourdieu (1986) argued how different forms of capital determine one’s social standing. In addition to economic capital, cultural capital (education, skills), and social capital (social relations and networks) are important factors that enhance people’s position in society. The *féministes* whom I present in this chapter are differently positioned vis-à-vis supposed wickedness than my other interlocutors. With most having enjoyed tertiary education, and working for large (international) organisations, they are well-equipped to engage in public debates about women’s rights. Such cultural and social capital is part of what constitutes people’s social status, and these elements set apart my *féministe* interlocutors from *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* in this study. Contrary to *ñi*

*gënn guddi* and *lesbiennes*, my *féministe* interlocutors mostly did not live sexually dissident lives, but the way in which they publicly debate questions of gender and sexuality can nevertheless lead them to be considered “wicked” for transgressing gender norms.

Central to the chapter is the tension between the cultural expectations of *sutura* (W: discretion, modesty, privacy) and a sexualised public sphere. I describe the developments of the public sphere in Senegal to analyse the frictions between public debates on sexuality on the one hand, and the expectations of *sutura* on the other. I focus on *féministes* because the debates that they engender in the public sphere demonstrate shifting ideas and articulations of so-called wickedness.

### ***Sutura* or speaking out against sexual violence**

The notion of *sutura* is important for understanding how women’s agency in the public sphere is perceived. *Sutura* is an important factor for maintaining social peace, which is conveyed in the following proverb: *Fu jàmm yendu, waaya fa xam lu mu waxul* (W: where peace reigns, there is someone who knows how to keep quiet about what they know) (Sylla 1978, 89). *Sutura* mediates between a state of honour and shame, and not respecting the value of *sutura* leads to shame both for individuals and for their family. Shame depends on public exposure, however, so the ability to hide a bad deed can avoid dishonour (Mills 2011). Although *sutura* is a value that everyone should uphold, women in particular are judged for their abidance (Gilbert 2017). *Sutura* is thus a gendered virtue and it is at the basis of feminine honour (ibid.). In addition to *sutura*, especially women are expected to demonstrate *muñ*, which “refers to silent and stoic female suffering in the face of hardship or challenges” (Foley and Drame 2013, 128). Quietly enduring hardship earns women respect; conversely, refusing to display these feminine virtues of silence and suffering, may lead women to be judged as “wicked.”

*Féministes* reject the norm of *sutura*, at least partly or temporarily, when they speak up about gender and sexuality in the public sphere. My *féministe* interlocutors saw *sutura* as a largely harmful practice as it enables a covering up of sexual violence, withholding women from reporting sexual violence, or from leaving an abusive husband or family member.<sup>13</sup> Acting with *sutura* in such cases largely protects perpetrators, while leaving victims silenced. *Féministes* have addressed the culture of impunity that characterises questions of sexual violence in their activism, which they see to be a result of the expectations of *sutura* and *muñ*.

<sup>13</sup> Focus group discussion with the feminist association SAWA (which I introduce on the next page), 5 February 2022.

On 3 July 2021, the Collectif des féministes au Sénégal (Collective of *féministes* in Senegal, hereafter Collectif) organised a demonstration against sexual violence, after a high school student had accused a classmate of rape. The case reached the media when it appeared that the young man was the son of an influential journalist who had himself been convicted for rape. He had received presidential grace after which he had returned to his work for television. When his son was accused of rape, he attempted to hush up the affair, and he tried to bring his son to France before the case could be brought to court. In an attempt to protest the covering up of this affair, the Collectif organised a demonstration. One of the signs that they had prepared for the protest read: *Ndeye bul muñ ba dee dawal ca bamuy teel* (W: Ndeye don't endure until death follows, run while you still can). Instead of adhering to the norm of *muñ*, which expects women to stay with a violent husband or family, this sign shows how *féministes* encourage women to choose for their personal safety and well-being.



Sit-in #justicepoulouise organised by the Collectif des féministes au Sénégal, 3 July 2021.  
Photo: Fatou Warkha Sambe.





Sit-in #justicepourtoulouse organised by the Collectif des féministes au Sénégal, 3 July 2021.  
Photo: Fatou Warkha Sambé.

The Collectif brings together individual *féministes*, many of whom work professionally on questions related to gender equality. The Collectif fosters collaboration and mobilisation around issues that they feel require immediate public attention and action. A lot of their actions so far have revolved around cases of sexual violence, and many of the women involved in the Collectif had worked on a project to get rape criminalised. On 25 May 2019, a demonstration had been organised after the rape and murder of Bineta Camara, a twenty-three-year-old woman from Tambacounda, a city in the east of the country (Laplace 2019). It had been the umpteenth rape followed by murder in a short time-span, and the last straw for the approximately 300 protesters who gathered at the Place de la Nation that 25 May 2019. A number of collectives and organisations, old and new ones, then joined hands to demand the criminalisation of rape, which until then had only been a misdemeanour. In December 2019, a proposal to change the law was voted through, and, since January 2020, rape has indeed become a criminal offence in Senegal.<sup>14</sup>

The change in the law did not, of course, change the reality of sexual violence overnight, and women continue to seek ways to address the persistence of sexual and gender-based violence in society. One of these women was Korka, whom I met in February 2022 at an event of SAWA (Senegalese Activist Women's Association), a feminist association that was established in 2020 and that is committed to the fight against sexual and sexist violence.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The *loi n° 2020-05 du 10 janvier 2020* modifies the *loi n° 65-60 du 21 juillet 1965* in the Penal Code. Instead of a *délit* (F: misdemeanour), rape is now a *crime* (F: crime) and, according to the new law, this adjustment serves to “*bien situer le blâme sur le violeur plutôt que sur la victime*” (F: place the blame on the rapist rather than on the victim).

<sup>15</sup> Not the real name of the association.



Korka was a journalist in her early thirties whom I met during a focus group discussion on sexual harassment and consent that SAWA had organised for a group of students. A couple of weeks later, she invited me to an “after-work” with her friends, most of whom were involved in SAWA, too. I was the first to arrive at the beach where we would meet. When Korka arrived, I noticed her trembling. Just before coming here she had been chatting over Facebook Messenger with a man who said that he knew her. He said that they had been high school friends, and that he wanted to reconnect with her. It took her a while to figure out if he was telling the truth about being an old friend – having ample experience of men making up all sorts of beautiful but false stories in order to seduce her, she had contacted a friend to discuss the issue with her. Then, she found out that the man was telling the truth – and she suddenly remembered who he was and why they had lost touch: when Korka had been in her first year of university, this man had attempted to rape her as he visited her on campus. An alert roommate had heard Korka scream in her room and had come to save her. She remembered all of this as she had been on her way with a taxi to our after-work. Trembling as she recounted this story, she burst into tears while she said: “*L’audace! Je ne peux pas croire qu’il ait l’audace de me contacter après tout ce qu’il a fait*” (F: The audacity! I cannot believe he has the audacity to contact me again after everything he did).<sup>16</sup> I asked Korka why she thought he wanted to reconnect with her. “*La seule explication que je peux donner c’est que les hommes ne nous considèrent pas comme des êtres humains entiers. Si non, comment tu peux croire que j’avais oublié une tentative de viol?*” (F: The only explanation I can give is that men do not consider women as full human beings like them. How could you otherwise think that I had forgotten this rape attempt?) After she had dried her tears, she continued in a hushed voice: “*Je n’arrive pas à croire que je doive m’occuper de cela. J’ai eu une longue semaine et chargée d’émotions, en parlant aux femmes sur l’harcèlement sexuel. Et là il a aussi ruiné mon vendredi soir*” (F: I cannot believe I have to deal with this. I have had a long and emotional week, talking to women about sexual harassment. And now he has ruined my Friday evening as well).

When she had recovered a bit, she shared that this had been her main motivation for setting up SAWA. In 2019, Korka and her friends had organised the campaign #bulmariisu (W: don’t rub against me), to denounce a form of sexual harassment that is so common in Dakar’s public transport, where packed buses enable men to harass women without being called out for it. After this campaign, the women had stayed in touch, and in 2020 they took the step of formalising their ideas and creating the association SAWA. In February 2022, they organised their first activities, which was a series of group discussions with the goal of informing young women about sexual harassment and consent. “*Souvent*” (F: Often), Korka said, “*les femmes ne savent même pas que ce que les hommes leur font, c’est du harcèlement sexuel*” (F: women do not even know that what men do to them is sexual harassment). To give an example, she shared the story of one of the women who had

<sup>16</sup> Fieldnotes, 18 February 2022.

been harassed during the celebrations after Senegal won the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) with the men's football team in February 2022. She had been filming herself in the crowd, when a hand from behind had grabbed her breast and squeezed it. Korka had asked the woman to share the video with her, because it was proof of harassment that could be used to file a complaint with the police. The woman had responded with *"Ah, c'était un jeune"* (F: Oh, it was a youngster), and Korka lamented this acquiescence, as if she accepted that this was just what men do. For Korka, speaking up against sexual violence was a key motivation for her feminist activism, and taking the official route of a police complaint was an important part of her conviction. For different reasons, people often refuse to report experiences of sexual harassment and violence. These can include the above-stated reason of acquiescence to a reality of sexual violence, but also a lack of trust in how complaints are handled. And importantly, the influence of the value of *sutura* ensures a realm of silence around questions pertaining to sexual violence.

Korka and her colleagues at SAWA had an idea of how silence around questions of harassment and violence were perpetuated, and they had a vision to break this silence. Their first project focused on speaking to youth about sexual harassment and consent, bodily integrity, and about making personal choices when it comes to marriage and sexuality: *"L'objectif c'est de leur donner une vraie éducation sexuelle, ce que nous n'avons pas reçus. À l'école, on a suivi un cours qui s'appelait ECOFAM, Économie et Sociologie de la vie familiale. Tout ce que je me souviens de ce cours, c'est qu'on nous a parlé des menstrues. Rien d'autre par rapport à notre sexualité"* (F: The objective is to give them a proper sexual education, something we never received. At school, we followed a course called ECOFAM, Economy and Sociology of family life. All I remember from this course, is that we spoke about menstruation. Nothing else with regards to our sexuality).<sup>17</sup> For Korka, the objective of SAWA was to work with women on verbalising experiences. Referring back to her own experiences with sexual violence during her youth, Korka remarked, *"Je n'avais pas les mots pour dénoncer ces agressions. Et je me suis dit, s'il n'y a pas les mots pour parler de cette violence, c'est comme si elle n'existe pas. Je veux apprendre aux femmes ces mots, ce langage, pour qu'elles puissent reconnaître et dénoncer cette violence"* (F: I didn't have the words to denounce these aggressions. And then I said to myself, when there are no words to speak about this violence, it is like they do not exist. I want to teach women these words, this language, so that they can recognise this violence and speak out against it).<sup>18</sup>

Speaking out, rather than maintaining *sutura*, drove Korka's engagement. The Collectif, which she was also part of, expressed this refusal to keep silent about sexual violence at the sit-in against sexual violence on 3 July 2021, where they had held up the sign *"dotuñu noppi"* (W: we will no longer be silent). Rejecting *sutura*, a value they understood to be

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Korka, 18 February 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Korka, 18 February 2022.

encouraging a patriarchal culture of impunity with regards to sexual violence, was an important driver for *féministes* like Korka and the associations that she was a part of.

While ideologically such a stance was clear, *féministes* nevertheless maintained *sutura* in relation to their own lives and relations with family. Nguenar's comment that I started this chapter with – “The one who likes to talk dies quickly” – indicates that women may face serious consequences when they cease the practice of *sutura*. These consequences have become more serious with the expansion of the public sphere in Senegal. I turn to this development now, before continuing an exploration of how Senegalese *féministes* navigate *sutura* as they attempt to contest supposed wickedness.

## The expansion of the public sphere in Senegal

The Senegalese public sphere is characterised by increasingly tense debates about gender and sexuality. This intensification of the public debate about gendered and sexual morality can partly be attributed to the expansion of the public sphere. The democratisation of politics and the liberalisation of the media, both of which have been gradual and uneven processes since the 1980s, enlarged the public sphere in Senegal. The liberalisation of the media started as part of a process of political democratisation under President Abdou Diouf. It was a step-by-step process, starting with the liberalisation of the print press in the 1980s, moving on to radio in the 1990s, and to television in the early 2000s (Wittmann 2008). This led to a proliferation of privately owned media channels, and a diversification of actors who sought political, religious, and social influence through media presence and representation. The emergence of a reformist movement in Senegal, which was partly the result of a global revival of political Islam, had contributed to a pluralisation of Islamic actors in the public sphere in the late 1970s (Gomez-Perez 2005). Islamist associations created their own newspaper journals, in which they expressed their concerns with the secular state and with what they perceived as a degradation of morality as a result of westernisation and lack of religiosity (Gomez-Perez 1994). The fragmentation of the Muslim Sufi orders in the 1980s and 1990s further increased the number of religious voices in the public sphere who turned to the media to mobilise followers (Guèye and Seck 2015).

The liberalisation of the media enabled the wide diffusion of religious, moralistic discourses, while at the same time contributing, more recently, to a sexualised public sphere (Mbaye 2016). Awa Diop (2012) noted the gendered dimension of the Senegalese public sphere through the proliferation of media attention towards women's so-called transgressive practices. The Senegalese popular press is oriented towards shocking the public, writing extensively on delinquency, sex, and voyeurism, and by denouncing public and private persons (Wittmann 2008). The actors attacking *féministes* for their activism,

and supposed *lesbiennes* and *gays* for what they consider immoral behaviour, are often media with roots in these religious movements, who make use of the media to voice a particularly critical stance against the secular state.

At the same time, the expansion of the public sphere contributed to an increasing visibility of women who take part in public debates and who assume leadership positions, including as politicians (Riley 2019), artists (Neff 2015), and Sufi religious leaders (Hill 2018). With the liberalisation of the media, women have also entered the public sphere as preachers, first in radio broadcasts, and later also on television, where they increased their following (Bâ 2014). Women's rights activists and *féministes* are part of this expanded public sphere, and many of them work professionally in journalism or with NGOs, where they work on questions of gender equality and women's rights.<sup>19</sup> The increased accessibility of (social) media has provided women with platforms to speak out in ways that they were previously not always granted such space in more hierarchically structured women's rights organisations or in public debates in general. For the majority of women, however, including those in the public sphere, declaring that one is not a *féministe* remains an important precaution, due to the negative public opinion about them (Ndoye 2018). In this chapter, I focus on *féministes* precisely because of the responses that their presence in the public sphere engenders.

## The development of feminist organisations in Senegal

Before the expansion of the public sphere in Senegal, through which the growth of civil society organisations, including women's and feminist organisations, took shape, there is a long history of women who assumed leadership positions and who pushed back against domination. There are different perspectives as to whether precolonial African societies were "patriarchal" or, instead, characterised by "gender complementarity" (Bakare-Yusuf 2003), but it is widely agreed that colonisation greatly reduced women's spheres of influence. Women everywhere protested against colonial impositions that diminished their freedoms and cut back their roles in society (Ardener 1973; Tamale 1996; Van Allen 1976; Wipper 1989). Women's active role in resisting colonialism has informed the argument that "women in Africa were 'feminist before feminism,' that is, engaged in agentic, self-determined, and typically collective advancement of their particular interests well before the advent of a modern self-named and putatively overarching women's movement" (Dosekun 2020, 49).

<sup>19</sup> Not all people or organisations working in the domain of women's rights or gender equality, call themselves *féministes*. See the next section for an elaboration of the contestations around the term feminism.

The histories of women's resistance against colonialism, and their roles as political leaders, have led people to argue that feminism does not originate from the West (Oyěwùmí 2003). At the same time, the term has been contested by Africans who associate feminism with Western imperialism (ibid.), and feminist theory with the position of white, bourgeois women as "a wife – the subordinated half of a couple in a nuclear family" (Oyěwùmí 2000, 1094). Others have argued that African societies, at least before colonialism, organised society based on a "dual sex system"; that while women and men were tasked with different roles and responsibilities, these were seen as complementary, and not hierarchical (Nzegwu 1994). The question of the Western origins of feminism has been debated among African (women) scholars active in women's and gender studies and -organising. They have debated African feminisms – what it means, how it should be approached, and how it relates to African lived experiences – since the 1980s (Dosekun 2020).

Following from these debates about the place of feminism in Africa, alternative appellations were coined. In the mid-1980s, the term "womanism" was proposed – in Nigeria by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and in the US by the African-American author Alice Walker – as a way to emphasise the importance of attending to black women's lived experiences (Ogunyemi 1985). Moreover, rather than seeing women's reproductive roles as something that has kept women in positions of subordination to their husbands, as Western feminists tended to suggest, scholars like Ifi Amadiume (1997) and Oyèrónké' Oyěwùmí (2000) highlighted the power of motherhood to African women's identities. The term "motherism" was created to stress the importance of motherhood and the female body in Africa (Acholonu 1995). The term nego-feminism was coined by Nnaemeka and Eyeve (2008) to argue that African feminism proceeds through negotiation rather than direct confrontation. Other scholars, like Amina Mama and Elaine Salo, however, have insisted on the term feminism. According to them, refusing the terminology does not in itself solve the problem of white global domination (Salo and Mama 2001) and contending with the idea that feminism belongs to the West serves a conservative, patriarchal nationalism (Lewis 2009). In contrast to Western feminism, however, African feminism "fused with liberation from other forms of oppression, namely slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, poverty, illiteracy and disease" (Steady 1981, 34). Given the debates about feminism in Africa, African feminisms are often spoken of in the plural, to remind us of the diverse perspectives on feminist praxis in Africa (Dieng 2020b).

### ***Women's rights and feminism in post-independence Senegal***

The history of women's organising in Senegal shows how women have always challenged gender norms. Moreover, a brief overview of this history provides insight into the central debates that women's rights and feminist activists have put forward, which helps to understand current feminist debates. Women's rights and feminist organisations emerged in Senegal in a context of post-independence nation-building. When Senegal

became independent in 1960, the first president Léopold Sédar Senghor had to govern a secular state that would take into account the (religious) pluralism in the country (Mamadou Diouf 2013). The creation of a Family Code was an essential aspect of this postcolonial state-making, and it was an expression of the desire to modernise Senegalese society through the law (Sow 2005; Villalón 1995). It also consolidated the authority of the state vis-à-vis the influential Muslim brotherhoods (N'Diaye 2014). The Code harmonised a pluralistic legal system that the French had created, synthesising French law with Islamic law and customary norms. One of the main objectives of the Code was to advance women's position in society. The Family Code sought to promote women's public participation, and it granted more rights to women, such as the requirement to register a marriage in the civil registry as a way to ensure a woman's consent (Bouilly 2018). Since its inception, the Family Code has been at the heart of debates about gender equality and women's rights in Senegal. On the one hand, religious authorities referred to it as the "Women's Code," and they argued that it went against Islamic principles (Sow 2005). *Féministes* and women's rights activists, on the other hand, have continuously pointed at the numerous legal inequalities that persist between men and women (Bouland 2022; Sow 2005). These inequalities are evident in numerous clauses, including paternal authority over children, a different legal age of marriage for women compared to men, the right of the husband to determine the couple's residence, and the absence of the right to establish paternity and to hold (presumed) fathers responsible for their child (Brossier 2004; Scales-Trent 2010). Despite some revisions in 1989, which can be partly attributed to the lobbying work of Senegal's first explicitly feminist organisation Yewwu-Yewwi, which I will elaborate on below, and other women's organisations such as the Association des Juristes Sénégalaises (Association of Senegalese women *juristes*, AJS), the state has refrained from making further adjustments as it attempts to balance the tensions between religious and feminist positions vis-à-vis the Code (Bouland 2022).<sup>20</sup>

The AJS was established just after the adoption of the Family Code in 1972, and one of its main objectives was to push for legal reforms where they considered the laws, including those in the Family Code, to reflect gender inequalities (Scales-Trent 2010). In addition to working towards changing laws, the AJS's objectives include the vernacularisation of information about the law, and the provision of free legal advice to people. Since 2008, they have been offering free legal advice to women via *boutiques de droit* (F: legal aid offices), which they opened in two popular neighbourhoods in Dakar and in a number of secondary cities (N'Diaye 2011). These *boutiques* were established particularly for women who are victim of sexual violence, and the assistance that they offer includes help with

<sup>20</sup> The demands for adjustments were made on the basis of the 1979 international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that Senegal had signed. The application of international human rights conventions to Senegalese domestic law remains a central focus of women's rights and feminist activism in Senegal, as the question of the legalisation of abortion later on in this chapter also shows.

marital and family disputes, gender-based violence, and discriminatory practices in general. The AJS is an important actor in discussions about gender equality; it does not identify itself as a feminist association, but primarily as a professional organisation. With their profession-based focus, the AJS seeks to remain independent from other women's organisations. Seeing their role primarily as experts on the law, this legal focus has kept the association at a distance from other women's and feminist organisations, for whom questions of rights are not always applicable to their everyday struggles (ibid.).

The emergence of women's rights organisations in Senegal was part of a wider trend in women's organising in Africa. In 1977, the feminist intellectual organisation Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFARD; in English: AAWORD, the Association of African Women for Research and Development) was established in response to the absence of African feminist voices in international feminist gatherings. AFARD brought together African scholars from the continent as a way to "*décolonis[er] [l]es études sur les Africaines*" (F: decolonise the research on African women) and to "*penser le genre d'un point de vue africaniste, c'est-à-dire en opposition au 'colonialisme intellectuel occidental'*" (F: study gender from an Africanist perspective, meaning in opposition to 'Western intellectual colonisation') (Touré Thiam 2018, 323). Feminist scholars and activists from all over Africa were represented in this initiative, which had its headquarters in Dakar. The UN Decade for Women, which was kickstarted in 1975 in Mexico, had served as an important catalyst for the emergence of women's movements everywhere in the world. Several UN conferences were organised on the topic of women's rights during this decade, in Mexico in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, and in Nairobi in 1985. In 1995, a conference was organised in Beijing to build on the political agreements that had been reached during the previous three conferences, which became a landmark for the recognition of women's rights (Jasor 2021). During the UN Decade for women, Senegal ratified all conventions that seek to advance women's rights, such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Rosander 2015). While Senegal has diligently signed international conventions to enhance women's rights and to end discrimination and violence against women, in domestic laws and legal practice, these rights are often ignored (Bop 2010). Because of the state's unreserved ratification of international treaties on human rights, action in the legal domain, such as the work done by the AJS, nevertheless offers opportunities for effectuating social change (N'Diaye 2011). The discrepancy between what Senegal signs internationally, and the laws that apply nationally, has always been, and remains, an important focus of feminist activism in Senegal.

## *Generations of féministes*

In 1984, the first explicitly feminist organisation, Yewwu-Yewwi PLF (Pour la Libération de la Femme – English: for women's liberation), was created.<sup>21</sup> Together with other women's and profession-based organisations like the AJS, Yewwu-Yewwi aimed at reforming the Family Code. Although the AJS and Yewwu-Yewwi shared this focus on reforms of the Family Code, and despite both organisations' intellectual, elite backgrounds, the associations have also clashed in their approach. Whereas the AJS kept its focus limited on advancing women's rights through adjustments in the secular laws, Yewwu-Yewwi proposed a broader transformation of society in line with their feminist principles. For the AJS, for example, the question of polygyny is a personal issue, and as an association they have never taken a stance on this. Yewwu-Yewwi, on the other hand, was against it, and they argued that polygyny preserved “*l'exploitation du corps de la femme, la négation de son droit à une vie sexuelle libre, le refus de son droit d'avoir un homme à elle*” (F: the exploitation of women's bodies, the denial of the right to a free sexual life, and the denial of her right to have a man to her own) (Fippu 1989). In addition to the Family Code, Yewwu-Yewwi worked for women's access to contraception and abortion, for the advancement of women's economic participation and political representation, and against violence against women, female circumcision, and polygyny.

Topics like the eradication of polygyny and female circumcision have always been subject to contestation from conservative voices in society, as well as animating fierce debate among *féministes*. In 1999, a law criminalising female circumcision was passed, which had been hotly debated for years. Opponents of the law, such as the Muslim hal pulaar, soninké, and mandeng communities, which have practiced female circumcision as part of initiation rituals, accused Senegalese *féministes* of being Westernised and anti-Islam (Sow 2005). The emergence of Islamist associations and journals in the late 1970s and 1980s in Dakar had played a role in further amplifying the critique on a supposedly Westernised feminist movement, and reformist groups like *ibadou* repeatedly tried to disturb meetings of Yewwu-Yewwi, verbally attacking *féministes*.<sup>22 23</sup>

Yewwu-Yewwi's positioning was clearly antagonistic towards such conservative religious currents. During a seminar that they organised in April 1989 “*Cultures en crises: quelles alternatives pour les femmes africaines?*” (F: Cultures in crises: What alternatives for African women?), they drafted a list of resolutions, calling for “*la mobilisation de toutes les*

<sup>21</sup> Yewwu-Yewwi is Wolof for “waking up, raising consciousness for liberation.”

<sup>22</sup> Short for Jamaatou Ibadou Rahmane (Association of servants of God), an Islamist association created in 1978 that distinguishes itself from the dominant Sufi Islam in Senegal and which critiques the secular Senegalese state, advocating for higher moral standards, as well as searching for political influence (Gomez-Perez 1994; 2017). In common parlance, *ibadou* is also used to refer to those who are considered generally religiously conservative people, for example women who veil and men who do not shake women's hands, whether they are part of the actual *ibadou* association or not (see also Cantone 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Marie-Angélique Savané, one of the founding members of Yewwu-Yewwi, 25 June 2021.



*femmes et des forces démocratiques pour barrer la route à la montée des courants et des idéologies rétrogrades et obscurantistes*” (F: the mobilisation of all women and democratic forces to block the way for the rise of backward and obscurantist ideologies and currents) (Fippu 1989). Yewwu-Yewwi explicitly positioned itself as a proponent of the secular state, arguing that religion is used to oppress women, and that, as such, it is antithetical to the liberation of women. But the debate about female circumcision had also been fierce between Western and African feminists. African feminists felt that Western feminists took an aggressive and paternalistic stance on female circumcision, whereby any nuance of moral or social values pertaining to the practice was lost (Ndoye 2018).



Photo of the seminar “Cultures en crise” organised by Yewwu-Yewwi, 17-20 April 1989 in Dakar (Fippu 1989).<sup>24</sup>

The question of the legalisation of abortion has been another contentious issue for a long time, but opposition to it has become stronger since, paradoxically, there has been more momentum to argue for its legalisation after Senegal signed a human rights treaty in 2003 that grants women the right to abortion in cases of rape or incest. I discuss this treaty, and the responses it generated from the state and from women’s rights organisations, in the next section. When, in the 1980s, Yewwu-Yewwi demanded the legalisation of abortion, it was met with opposition, but there was nevertheless more space to discuss the issue than there is today, said Marie-Angélique Savané, one of Yewwu-Yewwi’s founding members.<sup>25</sup> Between 1974 and 1978, she was the editor-in-chief of *Famille et Développement*. This magazine, which was published until the 1980s, was part of a movement to raise awareness among pupils, teachers, and health workers about

<sup>24</sup> The special issue provided a summary of the seminar that was organised in Dakar with African feminists by Yewwu-Yewwi. The list of participants shows that feminists from North-, West- and Central African countries were present.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Marie-Angélique Savané, 25 June 2021.

sexual education and teenage pregnancies. In the years that she edited the magazine, Savané visited many schools to discuss sexual education, something she believes would be impossible today. “*Le débat était plus ouvert à l’époque. Aujourd’hui, on pourrait me tuer si je réclame le droit à l’avortement tout court*” (F: The debate was more open back then. These days, I could be killed if I would demand the general right to abortion). The impact of the liberalisation of the media landscape has been visible in the debate about abortion, a debate to which I will turn in the next section.

In an analysis of organised feminist activism in Senegal, Gueye and Bâ (2021) identified three “waves” of feminism in Senegal. These “waves” do not coincide temporally or thematically with the categorisation of Western feminism into four waves. The first feminist wave in the West occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with women’s suffrage movements demanding women’s rights to vote. The second wave concerned women’s liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s fighting for legal and social equality. The third wave called for women’s individuality, sexuality, and diversity from 1992 onward. A fourth wave has been identified since 2012, and is often referred to as the #MeToo movement. In this wave, social media are central in addressing issues of sexual violence, harassment, and rape culture (S. Gamble 2001; Munro 2013). The metaphor of waves emerged in the 1970s in the West to show the novelty of the actions at the time compared to the actions of the women’s movement of the early twentieth century. The idea of categorising feminism into waves, or even generations, has been contested for various reasons. It obscures the historical role race has played in the development of feminist movements globally, and it presupposes teleological developments and clearly identifiable breaks with previous practices and ideas in feminism. I take this criticism seriously, and I only use “waves” in this section as I discuss Gueye and Bâ’s (2021) description of the developments in feminist organising in Senegal from the 1980s until today, as it gives insight into the shifting concerns of feminist organising.

After a first wave that was marked by the establishment of Yewwu-Yewwi, whose positioning has been understood as radical feminism, the second wave of feminist activism has been described by Gueye and Bâ (2021) as an “invisible generation.” Heavily influenced and encouraged by the work of Yewwu-Yewwi’s first generation of *féministes*, Réseau Siggil Jigéen was established in 1995. Siggil Jigéen continued the struggle for the inclusion of women in economic and political spheres of life, as well as women’s economic autonomy. They do not always explicitly position themselves as *féministe*, and they have refrained from involvement in some sensitive topics, choices that both O. Kane and H. Kane (2018) and Gueye and Bâ (2021) explain by the experience of strong opposition that Yewwu-Yewwi faced from conservative religious forces in the country and the criticism that Yewwu-Yewwi was anti-religious and westernised. Instead of ascribing to a radical, secular feminist ideology, this generation’s approach reflects Afro-Islamic womanism

(Latha 2010). Afro-Islamic womanism understands women and men's roles in society as complementary, and it sees advancements in gender equality as a combined effort of men and women. Afro-Islamic womanists operate within a religious (Islamic) and cultural (African) framework, and they actively seek collaborations and partnerships with government institutions and religious organisations as they work with both rural and urban women, and across hierarchies of caste and class (ibid.).

Where a second “wave” of feminist organisations was reluctant to call themselves *féministes*, the third and newest generation increasingly identifies as *féministes*, some of whom identify as radical *féministes* (Dieng 2023), even though the term *féministe* remains controversial even among women's rights activists (Badri and Tripp 2017). This third “wave” of Senegalese feminist activism emerged in the 2000s, and took a particular flight after 2010 with the advent of social media and globally circulating discourses about sexual violence. Social media are available to most women in Senegal today, particularly in urban areas. The #MeToo movement was started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an American civil rights activist, who encouraged other women to share their experiences with sexual abuse and assault in society (Global Fund for Women n.d.). The #MeToo movement also contributed to the revival of feminist activism in Senegal, and young women in particular have seized the opportunities that social media bring to directly speak up against violence against women. The hashtag #MeToo went viral, and the movement went global, after numerous allegations of sexual abuse against Harvey Weinstein in October 2017. In Senegal, the Senegalese *féministe*, author, and scholar Ndèye Fatou Kane created the hashtag #*balancetonsaisai* (W: denounce your pervert) in 2017. Inspired by the French hashtag #*balancetonporc* (F: denounce your pig), Kane opted for the Wolof term for pervert (*sai-sai*). The hashtag #*balancetonsaisai* thus calls upon women to denounce perverts (N.F. Kane 2017).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the French hashtag #*balancetonporc* and the Senegalese Wolof #*noppiwuma* (W: I'm not silent) once again brought sexual violence into the heart of public debates in Senegal. The Collectif, whose protest against sexual violence and the culture of impunity that surrounds it I described above, is an example of an initiative that emerged recently with this last “wave” of feminist activism.

So, there is a long history of women's and feminist activism in Senegal, with each era having their own focus and approach to questions of gender, sexuality, and women's rights in Senegal. Despite this history, a number of *féministes* have lamented the lack of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and strategies, partly as a result of the weakening of feminist movements in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>27</sup> The backlash that *féministes*

<sup>26</sup>The Ivorian feminist Miriam Bintou Traoré launched the hashtag #*vraiefemmeafricaine* (real African woman) in 2020, which went viral in francophone Africa, with women testifying what feminism has brought West African women and societies.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Coly, 21 September 2019. Coly also co-organised the intergenerational feminist dialogue Intergénérationnelles in June 2021. In their invitation, the organisers explained the need to consolidate the feminist movement as such.

are facing today from well-organised, well-funded religious organisations and media platforms, has led many *féministes* to emphasise the necessity to expand and consolidate a feminist movement. A number of attempts have emerged to bring together different generations of *féministes*. In June 2021, an international dialogue *Intergénérationnelles* (intergenerational + “elles,” the feminine plural form for “them” in French) was organised with support from the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Dakar. The aim was to strengthen the feminist movement, to bring together the different strategies and types of action, and to create a larger, intergenerational network of *féministes*. The challenge of aligning *féministes* is also the result of ideological divides as to what feminism in Senegal should mean. In an interview with the Senegalese scholar and activist Rama Salla Dieng, the president of Siggil Jigéen, an organisation that functions as a network of women’s rights organisations all over Senegal, explicitly distanced herself from the question of LGBTQI+ rights (Dieng 2023). Where *féministes* and civil society organisations have joined forces to combat sexual violence, the question of sexual rights remains a contentious topic. The current anti-queer sentiments in society keep same-sex sexualities at the margins of feminist activism in Senegal, but they also impact the work of *féministes* more generally, as the following example reveals.

### **Nguenar: Abortion activism and the paradox of *sutura***

*Féministes* and women’s rights organisations have long advocated for the right to abortion in cases of rape or incest. Senegalese abortion laws are very restrictive: abortion in Senegal is forbidden under all circumstances, even in cases of rape or incest. The only exception is when the life of the mother is in danger, but the procedure to have an abortion accorded under such circumstances is difficult. In addition to one’s own doctor, two other doctors have to give their consent. The law is a remnant of French law from 1920 that prohibited “incitement to abortion and contraceptive propaganda,” which, although repealed in 1980, was replaced by a new law with similar severe restrictions (The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy 2001). Article 305 of the Senegalese Penal Code states that women who undergo an abortion will be punished with six months up to two years of imprisonment, and a fine of between 20,000 and 100,000 FCFA (between 32 and 160 euros) (Gouvernement du Sénégal n.d.). When the Senegalese state signed the Maputo Protocol, officially The Protocol to the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, in 2003, the question of abortion got momentum. The Maputo Protocol is a human rights treaty of the African Union that is supposedly binding to the countries that ratified it. The Maputo Protocol includes an article, article 14.2,c, on the authorisation of abortion. The article urges states to “protect women’s reproductive rights, particularly by authorising medical abortion in cases of sexual aggression, rape or incest, and/or when the pregnancy endangers the women’s moral and physical health, her life or that of the foetus” (African Union n.d.). Because

Senegal signed all articles of the Maputo protocol without reservations, the adjustment of national laws in accordance with the Maputo Protocol became an important focus of abortion activism (Moseson et al. 2019).

Despite Senegal's unconditional ratification of the Protocol, including this article 14.2c, domestic laws have still not been adjusted, and resistance from conservative actors remains great. The following excerpt from a conversation that I had with my interlocutor Nguenar about the backlash she had experienced as a result of her engagement in abortion activism, is an example of what this resistance can look like.

*Nguenar: Oui c'est terrible mais je tiens le coup. Il y a une vidéo que [nom d'une chaîne YouTube] a fait. Ce sont des manipulateurs et des menteurs qui disent du mal sur ceux qui sont derrière cette campagne. Il a beaucoup parlé de Ramatoulaye mais il y a aussi ma photo qui est revenue à plusieurs dans cette vidéo. Le gars disait que nous appartenons à des lobbies et autres et c'est [nom d'une personnalité publique] qui est derrière tout ça.*

*Loes: Oui j'ai compris avec la vidéo comment ils font le lien entre l'avortement et l'homosexualité, le grand projet pour réduire la population africaine.*

*Nguenar: Tu as vu... c'est grave, j'ai demandé à Ramatoulaye de porter plainte. Elle refuse, c'est sûrement la pression familiale. Mais on a prévu un panel après le Magal, pour apporter une réponse à tout cela.*

*Loes: Ah super. Tu en feras partie aussi ?*

*Nguenar: Non. Mane dama sonn [W: je suis fatiguée]. Je me sens de plus en plus exposée. Je commence à avoir peur... et c'est un sentiment que je ne connaissais pas.*

*Loes: Tu voudrais rester un peu plus à l'ombre?*

*Nguenar: Oui si j'avais l'opportunité, mais en même temps je ne veux pas abandonner. Et j'ai plus peur pour mes proches, je m'inquiète pour eux en fait. Ils peuvent à tout moment dire que je suis dans des lobbies homo et autres et que je soutiens la communauté LGBT et faire une vidéo sur moi qui manipule tout ce qu'ils vont trouver sur le net. Avec moi c'est pas un problème car j'assume, mais la famille, tu sais comment cela se passe au Sénégal. Ils pourraient croire ce que les gens disent.*

**Nguenar:** Yes it's terrible, but I'm holding on. There's a video that [name of YouTube channel] made. They are manipulative and lying and saying bad things about the people behind this campaign. He talked a lot about Ramatoulaye, but there's also my picture in that video. The guy was saying that we belong to lobbies and stuff and it's [name of a public figure] who's behind it.<sup>28</sup>

**Loes:** I understood from the video that they draw a link between abortion and

<sup>28</sup> A féministe colleague and friend of Nguenar, whom I present later on in this chapter as well.

homosexuality, as part of a big programme to reduce the African population.

**Nguenar:** You see... It's serious, I asked Ramatoulaye to file a complaint. She refuses, it's certainly family pressure. But we have decided to organise a panel after the Magal, to respond to all of this.<sup>29</sup>

**Loes:** Ah great. Will you join this panel?

**Nguenar:** No, I am tired. I feel more and more exposed. I'm getting scared, and that's a feeling I didn't know before.

**Loes:** Do you want to keep a low profile?

**Nguenar:** Yes, if I could. But at the same time, I don't want to abandon. I'm getting scared for my relatives, however, and I'm worried about them. At any moment they can say that I'm in the gay lobby and that I support the LGBT community and they can make a video about me, changing every piece of information they find about me on the internet. It's not a problem for me because I believe in what I do, but the family, you know how this goes in Senegal. They might believe what people say.

I had this conversation with Nguenar on 19 September 2021, a couple of days after a YouTube channel, whose name I omit to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, published a video about civil society activism for the legalisation of abortion in cases of rape or incest in Senegal. In the video, the makers exposed what they called "the satanic feminist lobbies" and some individual women who had been involved in a recent campaign for the legalisation of abortion. Circulating conspiracies about a big project to reduce the African population, the video connected same-sex relationships to abortion, as both would supposedly reduce reproduction rates. Although demands for the legalisation of abortion have always been met with opposition, today they are increasingly linked to LGBTQI+ sexualities as a way to silence its proponents. Conspiracies that both the legalisation of abortion and of LGTBQI+ sexualities are part of a project of the West to depopulate Africa reflect anxieties about the reproduction of the population, and of the loss of patriarchal power structures (Tamale 2020).<sup>30</sup>

Playing into a climate of gender panic, such videos have been a means to silence activists. It worked: Nguenar decided to take a step back from abortion activism, at least temporarily. This reveals something about the impact of gender panic on women's agency in the public sphere, because it was the threat of being accused of being a *lesbienne*,

<sup>29</sup> The Magal is the annual pilgrimage of disciples of the Sufi Murid brotherhood to the city of Touba in Senegal. It commemorates the forced exile in 1906 of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, founding father of the Murid brotherhood. Because of the size of the event, which draws a couple of million pilgrims from Senegal and its diaspora, there is little attention in the media for any other news besides the Magal.

<sup>30</sup> Such rhetoric about attempts by the West to reduce African populations is not new. After a UN conference on population and development in Cairo in 1994, a number of Islamic organisations labelled any talk about reproductive health as attempts to curb population growth in Muslim societies (Renders 2002).

and the possible repercussions that she would face in her own family, which informed Nguenar's decision to withdraw from the campaign. She feared what public exposure as a supposed *lesbienne* would do to her respectability in her family and to their honour. “*Senegaal dafa ñaaw-làmmiñ*” (W: Senegal has an ugly tongue, i.e. people speak insolently), she said. “*Le moment où on dit que t’es lesbienne, personne ne verra plus tes actes. Tout ce que les gens voient, c’est ça, que t’es lesbienne*” (F: The moment you are labelled a *lesbienne*, people will no longer see what you do. All people will hear is that, that you’re a *lesbienne*).<sup>31</sup> The risk of being exposed as *lesbienne*, and thus of being shamed, impacts if and how people speak up publicly about gender and sexuality. Her colleague activist Ramatoulaye, who had decided not to pursue an official complaint against the makers of the video who exposed her as part of a “satanic lobby,” was, according to Nguenar, informed by “family pressure.” Their decisions demonstrate that *féministes* navigate a tense public sphere in which their visibility can backfire at them and their families.

The video that exposed Nguenar and Ramatoulaye had been made in response to a campaign that sought to instigate public debate about abortion. After the Senegalese government had signed the Maputo Protocol, a committee was established in 2010 with the attempt of reforming abortion law in line with the Protocol (Mbow and Diop 2017). The Comité de plaidoyer pour l'accès à l'avortement médicalisé au Sénégal (Advocacy committee for the access to medicalised abortion in Senegal), commonly referred to as “La Taskforce,” was established under the aegis of the Ministry of Health and Social Action, and it became active in 2013. The Taskforce regroups twenty-two civil society organisations, and it has led most of the advocacy work for the legalisation of medical abortion. The committee consists of legal practitioners, doctors, nurses, midwives, journalists, and religious actors.<sup>32</sup> As the coordinating organisation in the Taskforce, the AJS is the most visible actor. In 2021, the Taskforce organised a digital and media campaign, called *Wuyu Wallu*, with the objective to stimulate public debate about abortion law in Senegal. The *Wuyu Wallu* campaign consisted of trainings for activists on how to represent the ongoing advocacy for abortion in public debates, and various discussions were organised on television and radio. In response to the media attention that *Wuyu Wallu* had drawn to the issue, [name of YouTube channel] made this video attacking individual women, including Nguenar and Ramatoulaye, whom they had identified as taking part in the advocacy. The video may have also had a political objective, and, according to Ramatoulaye, the YouTube channel was owned by a critic of Macky Sall and often published videos that sought to discredit Sall's government. But the fact that *Wuyu Wallu* had moved the abortion discussion back to the centre of public debates led to Nguenar and Ramatoulaye being called out for speaking up about this issue.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Nguenar, 28 March 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Assembled in collectives like the Association des Femmes Médecins (Association of Women Doctors, AFEMS) and Réseau Siggil Jigéen (a network of NGOs that promote women's rights).



*Sutura* is used as a stick to beat women when they speak out and challenge gender norms openly. In the video, Ramatoulaye and Nguenar were exposed and attacked by the faith-based civil society organisation Jamra, an organisation that had, paradoxically, previously contacted Ramatoulaye to provide legal and medical assistance for women who were victims of gender-based and sexual violence against women.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, in the public debate, Jamra tries to close off all space for questioning the gender norms and structures that may lead to such violence. When women like Ramatoulaye and Nguenar do so, they are called out for it, especially when they are part of a large committee like the Taskforce, whose work can have real political influence.

As a result of strong opposition from influential religious leaders to demands for the legalisation of medical abortion, the Taskforce, and women's and feminist organisations, have adjusted their strategies to also incorporate religious arguments in their advocacy (N'Diaye 2021). Moreover, accusations of being westernised have led women activists to moderate their demands. Abortion activism in Senegal is currently focused on the demand for the harmonisation of the law with the Maputo Protocol, which would grant access to abortion only in the case of rape or incest. Activists do not (publicly) demand for the access to abortion for all women in all cases. Such choices show how women navigate the public sphere, balancing their demands and desires for a revision of norms and laws with the possible repercussions of going against such norms too much.

Abortion is an interesting issue from which to analyse perceptions of supposed wickedness. The strict abortion laws in Senegal, which make it virtually impossible to have an abortion legally, reflect strong social norms concerning acceptable childbearing. Ideas about shame that surround out-of-wedlock pregnancies are neither new nor unique to Senegal. In *Countless blessings: A history of childbirth and reproduction in the Sahel*, Barbara Cooper (2019) illustrates the long history of shame surrounding children conceived out of wedlock in the Sahelian region. To this day, she argues, women resort to clandestine abortions or infanticide as a result of the unacceptability of raising an illegitimate child without the support of the father's family, and of rejection and stigma from their own families. Clandestine abortion or infanticide may sometimes be a woman's only option to (attempt to) avoid the stigma, and the tremendous consequences, of having a baby out of wedlock (Mbassa Menick 2000). In Senegal, the majority of abortions and infanticides are reported from women whose husbands have been away from Senegal for years on end, often as migrants in Europe. Hannaford (2017, 80) argues that "the perception of a widespread trend of wives getting pregnant in the absence of their migrant husbands circulates in Senegal and in the diaspora as a sort of urban legend, one that carries the particular consequence of subjecting migrants' wives to increased suspicion and social control."

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ramatoulaye, 13 September 2021.



Such an urban legend acts as a way to discipline women and it is indicative of sexual norms and the stigmatisation that comes with women having a baby out of wedlock.

As a consequence of the restrictive abortion law and strong social norms that condemn out of wedlock pregnancies as shameful, the occurrence of infanticide and clandestine abortions in Senegal is high (Moseson et al. 2019). A study by Mbassa Menick (2000), who consulted psychiatric reports of women offenders between 1968 and 1994, found that twenty per cent of women offenders had committed infanticide. More recent estimates suggest that clandestine abortions and infanticide together are responsible for between one quarter and one third of female incarceration (Suh 2021). Because clandestine abortions regularly lead to complications, many women still have to go to the hospital for post-abortion care. Although they risk imprisonment – a doctor could report induced abortion to the police – in most cases, post-abortion care in Senegalese hospitals is reported as miscarriage rather than induced abortion (Suh 2019). The figures of clandestine abortions and infanticide constitute important arguments for advocacy for the access to medicalised abortion.

## **Ramatoulaye: Institutionalised discretion and the question of sexual rights**

Ramatoulaye, a *féministe* in her early forties, has been active in this advocacy for the legalisation of abortion in Senegal for years. She is a legal practitioner by training, and she has worked for a number of civil society organisations and international NGOs. After having worked for a private law cabinet for a couple of years, she joined a civil society organisation, through which she became involved in the work of the Taskforce. Her approach to (abortion) activism, in combination with her family background, sheds light on how women carefully navigate contentious issues with family expectations.

Ramatoulaye explained her feminism as resulting from her parents' divorce, for which her mother took all the blame. After obtaining her high school diploma, she studied law with the desire to understand the divorce process. She wanted to understand why only her mother was blamed. For a long time she, too, blamed her mother for leaving her father. *“J’ai été influencé par la société sénégalaise quand-même, et comme on dit ici: jigéen ju baax benn jëkkër la am”* (F/W: I was influenced by Senegalese society too, and as we say here: a good woman has one husband).<sup>34</sup> With time, she came to understand the situation as unjust, and studying law would help her *“pour enfermer mon père”* (F: to lock up my father).<sup>35</sup> On a broader societal level, she became determined to challenge these gender inequalities.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ramatoulaye, 13 September 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Ramatoulaye, 22 June 2021.

When I met Ramatoulaye she was unmarried and without children, which is exceptional in her family. She comes from a religious family and both of her parents had worked in religious education. Most of Ramatoulaye's aunts and female cousins had married young, before the age of twenty. Her own mother had married at the age of thirteen. One of her mother's younger sisters had married late, however, and Ramatoulaye explained that her family was worried that others might now come to see the family as “*ñaw*” (W: ugly) or Ramatoulaye's still single status as a “*malédiction*” (F: curse), as she was the second woman in the family to marry late. She was not very bothered by her status as an unmarried woman herself: “[Ça] ne me stresse nullement [...] mais ce qui me stresse c'est les hommes eux-mêmes, comment ils te courent après, jusqu'à te harceler même” (F: [It] does not stress me at all [...] but what stresses me are the men themselves, how they run after you, even to the point of harassing you). She shared with me how she had recently rejected a man who had wanted to marry her. He had a wife already, and he wanted to marry Ramatoulaye as a second wife. She had inquired after his financial situation, and learned that he would not be able to offer her what she would expect of a husband to provide her. Ramatoulaye has a stable and fairly high income, so she does not depend financially on someone else, but, she argued,

*Du fait de mon féminisme et mon travail dans le domaine de la loi, je demanderai à un homme de s'occuper de moi financièrement. Tant que la loi ne change pas... parce que la femme est très défavorisée dans la loi, donc si la femme fait face à toute sorte de contraintes, l'homme devrait prendre sa responsabilité aussi, et payer le loyer et la nourriture* (F: from my feminism and my work as a lawyer, I will ask a man to take care of me financially. As long as the law does not change... because in other respects, the woman is very disadvantaged in the law, so if the woman has all sorts of constraints, the man should also take responsibility, including paying the rent and food).

And she added, “*ce sera difficile de trouver un homme qui me convient...*” (F: it will be difficult to find a man who suits me). Ramatoulaye thought that her mother was primarily concerned with what other people think of her, and that she was worried that, in combination with Ramatoulaye's feminism, people would talk about her desiring too much freedom, being too frivolous, and refusing male authority.

Although her family was concerned that Ramatoulaye's feminism made her unruly, and hence “wicked,” within the milieu of *féministes* she was known as a very diplomatic person – very committed to her activism, yet very discreet in her approach. “*Elle ne cherche pas à se faire voir*” (F: she is not looking to be seen), said Coly, a *féministe* and academic who had been part of the committee to organise the intergenerational feminist dialogue in 2021 which I described above. And Nguenar described Ramatoulaye as someone who

*“ne fait pas de bêtises... Elle ressent la pression familiale, sa famille est de Touba”* (F: does not do anything stupid... She feels the family pressure, her family is from Touba).<sup>36</sup> Ramatoulaye navigates her deeply religious family background with her own personal strong feminist convictions.

This tension between personal convictions and family status is not unknown to others. Among Senegalese *féministes*, there is serious debate about the desired extent of visibility and outspokenness of feminist activism. This debate is particularly contentious in the domain of sexual rights. Many *féministes* whom I spoke to viewed the current anti-queer sentiments as a sign of a regression, and the attack on LGBTQI+ sexualities as the beginning of worse. Ramatoulaye argued: *“Le Sénégal régresse par rapport aux questions de genre et de sexualité. Aujourd’hui j’ai dit ça à un collègue pendant la réunion de ONU femmes. Mame Mactar Gueye et autres vont s’attaquer aux droits des femmes après avoir attaqué les homosexuels”* (F: Senegal is regressing when it comes to gender and sexuality issues. I said this to a colleague today at a UN Women meeting. Mame Mactar Gueye and others are going to attack women’s rights after they attacked homosexuals).<sup>3738</sup> Ramatoulaye stressed the importance of standing up for LGBTQI+ rights as she saw the connection with other women’s (sexual) rights. The question is how to do so in a climate of gender panic.

Questions of sexual rights have long been a silenced aspect of women’s and feminist organising in Africa (Okech 2013). Where attempts are made to include “lesbians” into feminist organising, essentialising ideas about what it means to be “feminist” or “lesbian” may neglect the particular challenges that “lesbians” and other sexual and gender non-conforming people face in a heteronormative system (Matebeni 2011). In Senegal, sexual rights have also remained a silenced aspect of feminism. The question is why Senegalese *féministes* keep quiet, mostly, about sexual rights.

The answer is at least twofold. First, the tension between the demands of *sutura* on the one hand, and a growing public sphere with intensifying public debates about sexuality on the other hand, has led *féministes* at times to adopt institutionalised forms of discretion and maintain silence at other moments. With institutionalised discretion, I mean that organisations and associations make careful decisions about the topics that they work on and that they engage in public debates about. The need to keep silent about some topics more than others relates to the navigation of tense public debates and gender panic. Not speaking out about questions of sexual rights can be a way for organisations to be taken seriously, and to avoid being dismissed as being a mouthpiece for a so-called Western

<sup>36</sup> Touba is the second largest city after Dakar, and it is the holy city of the Murid brotherhood.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ramatoulaye, 22 June 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Mame Mactar Gueye is the vice-president of the NGO Jamra, a faith-based civil society organisation that is very active in debates about (sexual) morality, and that has been one of the loud voices in anti-queer debates.

gender ideology. Currently, such institutionalised forms of discretion importantly include deliberations on if, and how, to engage with debates about same-sex sexualities. For many organisations and for individual *féministes*, the potential consequences of speaking out for sexual rights prevents them from engaging in the debate at all.

Secondly, the answer also lies in the affordances of silence. In the context of the Gambia, where the state encourages homophobia, Nyanzi (2015) argues that silence is first of all a mode of self-protection for same-sex desiring individuals, and that it can additionally be an expression of defiance. The absence of visible protest and activism for sexual rights must not be assumed to be the result of shame or oppression of sexually dissident populations. Loudly voicing demands for the public recognition of gender and sexual dissidence, articulated through a framework of human rights, represents only one, particularly Euro-American, approach to politicising gender and sexual diversity (Dankwa 2021; Massad 2007; Nyanzi 2015). Refusing to take part in sexual rights discourses, and instead quietly persisting in local understandings and experiences of non-conforming gender and sexual desires and practices, can be a conscious alternative to vocal sexual rights activism. With rising tensions over dissident sexualities and a discourse of Western imperialism that is supposedly at the basis of the spread of sexual rights activism, such silences with regards to sexual rights discourses are important for feminist organising in Senegal too. Because, Sinnott argues (2004, 24), “in the postcolonial context, a connotation of being Western is a double-edged sword.”

Institutionalised forms of discretion with regards to same-sex sexualities are rooted in the socio-political context of anti-queer legislation. As a result of the criminalisation of same-sex conduct, Senegalese organisations working with same-sex desiring individuals have existed in the first place as organisations for public health with a focus on combating HIV/AIDS. Despite a low overall infection rate among the total population of less than one per cent (UNAIDS 2008), the infection rate among men who have sex with men has been around 21.5 per cent (Wade et al. 2005). Consequently, the Senegalese government encouraged the establishment of organisations working on the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, which included organisations of *gay* men (RFI 2017). The organisations that were established in view of HIV/AIDS programming have worked predominantly with *gay* men, or men who have sex with men (MSM) as they continue to be called in health circles. *Lesbiennes* are increasingly invited to join these organisations today, in addition to there being two women-focused organisations, but feminist organisations remain reluctant to engage with questions of sexual rights.

When, in November 2021, the project for a law proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ sexualities was mediated, and accompanied by large demonstrations “*Non à l’homosexualité*” in May 2021 and February 2022, the response from *féministes* was varied.

Some were quick to overtly denounce the project and write to international embassies and partner organisations to argue that this was a demonstration of Senegal's regression in protecting human rights and the right to privacy, but others strongly discouraged a public response to the event. They argued that it would only play into the hands of those who proposed a change of the law, because it would incite public attention and debate. They argued that those proposing the law already have public opinion on their side. If *féministes* would associate themselves with sexual rights activism, this would lessen the credibility of and sympathy for other concerns, these *féministes* argued. Because “homosexuality” is often presented as the prime evil, being accused of being a *lesbienne* is a quick way to lose credibility for your work. For a person like Nguenar, who is very embedded in her family and neighbourhood, and who is also visible in the public sphere through her work in the cultural sector and her regular appearance on television talk shows, retaliation and the resulting stigma are serious concerns. Above all, Nguenar fears that her family would believe it if an accusation of “lesbianism” would be made in the media – as an unmarried woman in her early thirties, it could be true. Hence, not (overtly) associating with sexual rights activism is a consideration for her respectability and that of her family. It is in line with the expectation of *sutura* to maintain the family honour by avoiding exposure of what is considered a bad deed, even if such exposure would just be the result of a malicious backlash in the media.

Virulent anti-queer discourse in the public sphere leads many *féministes* to avoid (overtly) engaging with sexual rights activism, and it may even lead organisations to cease collaborations with organisations that work on sexual rights. Ramatoulaye shared how the AJS, with whom she had been involved in a programme called Right Here Right Now, had dropped out of that programme when its president had found out that LGBTQI+ organisations were participating.<sup>39</sup> Right Here Right Now was a youth-centred programme on sexual and reproductive health and rights that specifically focused on girls, young women, and LGBTQI+ people (Right Here Right Now n.d.).

Ramatoulaye herself had found a way to discreetly engage with sexual rights activism without neglecting the importance of institutional silence. Despite the fact that Ramatoulaye's boss decided to step out of a programme that included work with sexual rights organisations, Ramatoulaye has personally been involved with the work of an organisation for *lesbiennes*. In one of the NGOs that she worked with years ago, she met Nafissatou, who had shared with Ramatoulaye her desire to establish an organisation for *lesbiennes*. With her expertise of the law, Ramatoulaye was able to assist Nafissatou with the legal aspects of establishing such an organisation. She has continued to act as a sounding board for Nafissatou and, wherever she can, she assists with the follow-up of cases of (sexual) violence against *lesbiennes* when Nafissatou shares these with her.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Ramatoulaye, 22 June 2021.

When Nafissatou was personally attacked in the media a couple of years ago, accused of being the “mother” of all *lesbiennes* in Senegal, and held responsible for the supposed “lesbianisation” of society, Ramatoulaye advised her on how (not) to respond to these accusations. Her advice to Nafissatou had been to keep quiet and to avoid debating the question publicly. Ramatoulaye’s approach is often to avoid pouring oil on the fire, and she often advises ignoring such attacks, while continuing doing the work that she does. Working with *lesbiennes* “behind the scenes” has allowed Ramatoulaye to stay out of virulent public debates about sexual rights. The fact that sexual rights activism does not occur at the centre of feminist organising in Senegal does not mean that *féministes* like Ramatoulaye do not engage with it.

Where many *féministes* have been struggling to position themselves vis-à-vis questions of sexual rights, in view of the repercussions that they may face for speaking out about such questions, in other domains women face even more challenges to speak out in the public sphere. *Féministes* had some cultural and social capital to engage in public debates, but most of my other interlocutors lacked these forms of capital, at least in an institutionalised form. As will be shown below, the way in which women footballers relate to public debates about the position of women’s football in society reveals that the public debates that *féministes* participate in are hardly attainable for many other women.

## **Fadiga: The paradoxical publicness of women’s football**

“Si le féminisme consiste à défendre les droits des femmes à vivre leur vie comme elles l’entendent, en suivant leurs propres rêves et désirs, bon, moi, je suis une féministe!” (F: If feminism is about defending women’s rights to live their life as they please, following their own dreams and desires, well, then I’m a *féministe*!,” exclaimed Fadiga, a student, journalist, and football activist in her mid-twenties.<sup>40</sup> She had gathered with four friends for a meeting of the Association des Footballeuses Professionnelles (F: Association of Professional Women Footballers, AFP) to define their objectives for the coming year.<sup>41</sup> The AFP consists of five former (international) Senegalese women football players, most of whom have remained involved in women’s football as coaches, referees, or as part of the staff of women’s teams. Together, they wanted to do something about the inequalities and (sexual) abuse that occur in women’s football in the country. From September 2021, I followed how these women tried to set up their own association for the development of women’s football in Senegal. I had got to know some of the women via the football teams that I had met over the course of my research. I attended some of the association’s first meetings in which they discussed the activities and projects that they planned to develop. Their ideas ranged from organising more football activities, to encouraging the training of female coaches and managers, to addressing sexual violence in women’s football.

<sup>40</sup> Informal conversation with members of AFP, 4 April 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Not the real name of the association.

During a meeting with the group in April 2022, when Fadiga exclaimed that she was a *féministe*, the women had debated the meaning of feminism and whether they should identify as *féministes* too. The debate had been instigated by a remark made by one of the women who had seen my photo on a WhatsApp status update of her former classmate, a *féministe* who happened to be my interlocutor. In the debate that followed, it turned out that they did not all consider themselves *féministes*. One of the women found that *féministes* were too boisterous and confrontational. In her eyes, such an approach was unhelpful if you wanted to make change happen. The growing visibility of women's football offered opportunities to women to address inequalities in the domain of women's football, but gender panic and rising anti-queer sentiments also made women anxious about the common association between women's football and supposed lesbianism. Loudly proclaiming to be *féministes* could contribute to a negative perception of the women's football association.

The existence of women's football in Senegal reveals how women's football occupies a paradoxical position in the Senegalese public sphere. Women's football has been organised in Senegal since 1974, when a former track athlete, Eliot Khouma, formed the first women's team in Dakar, called Gazelles (Savédraa 2004). In 2000, the first nationwide women's league with twelve teams was organised by the Senegalese Football Federation, and by 2001 the first national team was established (*ibid.*). Women's football reveals a paradox: on the one hand, the football field is a space where women's masculine styles and gender dissidence are tacitly tolerated; on the other hand, it remains a space that many consider unsuitable for women, precisely because of the associations with masculinity. Occasional "alarms" in the media about the presence of *lesbiennes* in women's football go hand in hand with a tacit acceptance of gender and sexual dissidence in women's football (Oudenhuijsen 2018). I contend that this paradox can be understood through the cultural expectation of *sutura*. Women may play football as long as it remains a temporary game (or, alternatively, if real professional success is booked), but it becomes a problem when women like Fadiga and her association AFP decide to speak up in the public sphere.

Although Fadiga convincingly proclaimed herself to be a *féministe*, she was not unknown to the struggle of how to position herself in the public sphere. Nafissatou had introduced me to Fadiga in 2020. The two had known each other for a short while then, since Fadiga had been looking for a sexual rights organisation to become involved with. Fadiga had acquainted herself with the activities of a number of organisations, which is where she met Nafissatou. Nafissatou was happy to introduce me to Fadiga, who had repeatedly told Nafissatou that she was "*prête à s'engager pour la communauté*" (F: ready to commit herself to the community).<sup>42</sup> While introducing me to her on the phone, Nafissatou encouraged Fadiga again to "*carrément intégrer l'association*" (F: to really join the association). Although

<sup>42</sup> Conversation with Nafissatou, 25 February 2020.

Fadiga had been organising her own *causeries* (F: informal gatherings) with some of the women from Dakar's football teams, she had been hesitant to become active beyond the football milieu. When Fadiga and I spoke about her engagement again in May 2021, just a few days before a large anti-queer protest in Dakar, she admitted that “*elle [Nafissatou] a raison, j'ai peur de m'engager. Je me cache derrière le football, surtout avec la manifestation qui arrive*” (F: she [Nafissatou] is right, I am afraid to commit myself. I hide behind football, especially with the upcoming protest).<sup>43</sup> Although she had got to know multiple sexual rights organisations over the past years, and she had participated in some of their workshops, the world of women's football had remained a preferred environment for her activism.

Fadiga's hesitation to become involved in sexual rights organisations had multiple reasons related to her social positioning. Her studies, work, and football engagements had led Fadiga to move into her grandfather's house, instead of staying with her mother and siblings who live on the outskirts of Dakar. Situated in one of the densely populated neighbourhoods of Dakar, her grandfather's house is home to the large extended family – her maternal grandfather, his two wives, their children with their spouses and children. Due to a family conflict concerning the house that Fadiga's mother lives in, Fadiga was not automatically welcomed into her grandfather's household, and she has to pay rent of about 50 euros a month. Fadiga also takes charge of her mother's daily expenses. Her mother lives with Fadiga's two brothers and two younger sisters. Her older brother is unable to work due to an accident he had a couple of years ago. Her father, who also had an accident that disabled him a few years back, moved back to his village, and he is unable to support his family financially. Both of Fadiga's younger sisters are still in school, and, together with her younger brother, Fadiga has taken up the responsibility of paying the daily expenses for the family. Given her financial responsibilities, and her desire to earn a living in the domain of football, she has been careful not to jeopardise her position.

At home with her grandfather, Fadiga also had to be careful about her reputation. A couple of years ago, one of her uncles, Mohamed, who also lives in the house, had got into trouble with the family after his brother had caught him in his room with another man. The brother then went downstairs to tell the whole family what he had seen, after which their father (Fadiga's grandfather) decided that he should kick Mohamed out of the house. When Nafissatou heard about his troubles, she came to talk to Mohamed's father to make him change his mind. Although he had thus far refused to talk to anyone about his decision to kick Mohamed out of the house, Nafissatou found a way to talk to him:

<sup>43</sup> Conversation with Fadiga, 17 May 2021.



“Tu l’as vu, comment il s’installe dans la cour avec son *Quran* toute la journée. Je l’ai abordé d’une autre manière donc. Puisqu’on est des cousins à plaisanteries, il y a le devoir d’être honnête avec l’autre, et il y a une certaine facilité à construire une relation” (F: You have seen how he installs himself in the courtyard with his *Quran* the whole day. Therefore, I approached him in another way. Because we are *cousins à plaisanteries*, we have to be honest with each other, and there is a certain ease in building a relationship).<sup>44</sup>

*Cousins à plaisanteries* or *parenté à plaisanteries* (F: joking cousins or joking kinship) refers to a social practice that is common among many ethnic groups in West Africa. Family names are paired with other family names and designated as kin/cousins. In these joking kinships, people are allowed, or even expected to – jokingly – insult one another, also when they don’t know the other person, with the objective of maintaining peace and social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies (Griaule 1948; Smith 2004). Because these joking relationships underscore the long-standing ties between families, Nafissatou invoked these joking relationships to convince Mohamed’s father to at least speak to her. A number of return visits followed, and she was finally able to convince his father to let Mohamed stay in the house. Because the rumours about his supposed homosexuality had spread, and the relations with his family were strained, he saw no other option than to get married. Mohamed and his wife still live with his family, and the two regularly provide a listening ear to Fadiga in event of a conflict with her girlfriend or with other *lesbienne* friends. Nevertheless, Fadiga remains very careful not to draw the attention of her other family members to her same-sex relationships, having witnessed the consequences that her uncle had faced when the family had found out about his same-sex liaison.

“Hiding behind football” was thus a way for Fadiga to avoid becoming associated with sexual rights activism while still organising activities for women related to sexual rights and -health. Fadiga’s eagerness to organise activities for women footballers on topics related to sexual rights was not, however, shared by everyone in AFP. The following example shows the frictions that the question of sexual rights creates among women, as well as how sexual rights activism can be at odds with the objectives and experiences of same-sex desiring women.

In 2022, I told Thioro, a *féministe* and medical professional in her early forties, about the establishment of AFP. She had just informed me about a pilot of mental health workshops for *lesbiennes* and *gays* that she tried to organise at the UIN Human Rights Office. Together, we discussed the possibilities of providing such workshops or counselling to women footballers. A few days earlier, I had attended a workshop on human rights and the Senegalese law that was provided by Ramatoulaye in collaboration with a sexual

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Nafissatou, 30 August 2020.

rights organisation. A couple of women footballers had attended, and I had been deeply moved when seeing one of them, a tough woman with an air of confidence, burst into tears as she shared how she was often called names and stigmatised in her neighbourhood, and how she sometimes then left her home to stay with her friend with whom she had come to this workshop. It made me realise, again, that no matter how tough and confident some of these women appear, many of them carry stories of painful experiences. Because they do not always have a place or a person to share these experiences with, I proposed to Thioro that these women could be included in her pilot. She was enthusiastic about the idea and immediately put me in touch with her friend at the UN Human Rights Office with whom she was in the process of setting this up.

When I got home from my meeting with Thioro, I sent a WhatsApp message to AFP to share this idea with them. The group remained silent, and the first reply I got was a private message from Anta. Anta was a car mechanic in her early thirties who had stopped playing football a couple of years earlier. She had stayed in touch with some of her football friends, and when she was informed about the idea of forming an association for the development of women's football, she was eager to contribute. Anta and I had met back in 2017 when we had both come to watch a women's football game. The chair of AFP, Khady, who was Anta's girlfriend at the time, had called Anta to tell her that she could not respond to my idea. Anta decided to inform me about Khady's reaction, and she said to me:

*Tu [Loes] as écrit LGBT. Je crois que c'est le mot qui fait peur aux gens. Donc, on évite d'écrire ce genre de truc dans le groupe. Si non ils vont penser qu'on est sur ça et tout. Donc, c'est que je t'avais dit: on le fait, mais sans que les gens sachent qu'on est dans le truc. On le fait en cachet, c'est mieux, d'accord? (F: You [Loes] wrote LGBT. I think that it's the word that scares people. So, we avoid writing that kind of stuff in the group. Otherwise they'll think that that's what we're about and all that. So it's like I said: we do it, but we don't let people know we're into it. We do it secretly, that's better, ok?)<sup>45</sup>*

When I saw Anta a day later, I asked her what the issue was exactly, and why the others had not responded to my message in the group. She explained that,

*[Khady] vit sa vie très discrètement. Elle n'aime pas qu'on parle de l'homosexualité. Un jour, je lui ai dit que j'avais participé à quelques ateliers sur les droits humains et les droits des LGBT avec les Nations Unies. Elle était surprise que je sois dans le milieu. Elle m'avait dit que j'adore trop. Elle ne connaît pas ce milieu (F: [Khady] lives her life very discreetly. She doesn't like us to talk about homosexuality. One day I told*

<sup>45</sup> WhatsApp conversation with Anta, 30 January 2022.

her that I had previously attended some workshops on human rights and LGBT rights at the United Nations, and she was surprised that I am embedded in the milieu. She said I love it too much. She doesn't know this milieu).

The discomfort that Khady felt when she had heard me speak openly of “LGBT” issues, may have multiple reasons.<sup>46</sup> It is, firstly, a question of language. She has always lived her life as a *lesbienne* discreetly: she has had same-sex relationships, but she is not accustomed to sexual rights discourses or to nominalising her same-sex desires. Khady's fear, which I only spoke about with Anta, and not with Khady herself, is likely also the result of the growing attention to LGBTQI+ issues in the public sphere. When we had this conversation, another anti-queer demonstration had been planned in a couple of weeks. I attended that demonstration and I heard one of the speakers on stage call the crowd's attention to *lesbiennes*. The focus on *gay* men until then had led, in his words, to a “lesbianisation” of society, where women from all walks of life, but particularly young women in schools and sports clubs, had been lured into “lesbianism.”<sup>47</sup> Women like Khady (and also Nguenar, whose story was revealed above) are very careful not to become associated with this debate, out of fear of being exposed as a *lesbienne*, but also out of fear for their work with their organisations losing credibility. The discussions that the women of AFP have had about their relation to both feminism and sexual rights organisations tell us something about the terrain that they navigate as they try to position themselves in the public domain.

The domain of women's football proved to be challenging for the establishment of their association. They struggled to maintain autonomy vis-à-vis influential actors in football, and this hampered their ability to effectively voice critique against the status quo that allows for sexual abuse and violence to happen with impunity. It has been a challenge to navigate their position, as some of AFP's members hold a part-time paid position in the women's football domain as coaches or co-organisers of the women's competitions. This means that to bluntly and publicly reveal the abuses in women's football jeopardises their own professional positions. The way in which Fadiga was silenced when she spoke out against sexual violence in women's teams shows this tension.

In 2022, Fadiga told me about a player of one of the national youth teams, who had been impregnated by one of the coaches during a training camp. When the staff of the team found out that she was pregnant, they asked a doctor to induce an abortion. Complications arose and the woman was hospitalised for a few weeks, after which she

<sup>46</sup>When speaking about dissident sexualities, LGBT is the acronym that is commonly used in Senegal when discussing sexual rights organisations and activism. The “QI+” are hardly ever articulated, hence I write LGBT in the quotes, but add the QI+ when I phrase public debates about LGBTQI+/dissident sexualities more broadly.

<sup>47</sup>Fieldnotes, 20 February 2022.

was taken to her mother's home. Meanwhile, the story had spread among her teammates. In order to avoid the story from coming out, the coaches confiscated the women's phones. When they got their phones back a few days later, one of them had called Fadiga to share what had happened. They felt that they could not do anything about the situation, the woman had said to Fadiga, as they risked not being invited to the national team again. Shocked by what she heard, and determined to denounce the situation, Fadiga decided to call the woman in question. She recounted to me,

*Quand je lui ai parlé, j'ai entendu sa voix trembler. Elle est traumatisée. Mais lorsque je leur ai rendu visite et que j'ai parlé à sa mère pour lui dire qu'il fallait dénoncer l'entraîneur, sa mère a hurlé que je ne devais pas me mêler de la situation. 'Sa yoon nekku ci, seytaane nga trop. Mane Jóola laa, boo waxe dara dinaa la yàq!' Elle m'a dit. (F/W: When I spoke to her, I heard her voice tremble. She is traumatised. But when I visited them, and I spoke to her mother to tell her that we should denounce the coach, her mother yelled at me that I should stay out of the situation. 'This is none of your business, you're so evil. I am a Joola, and if you say anything about this, I will destroy you!' She said).<sup>48</sup>*

The mother invoked her Joola ethnicity, which is the dominant ethnicity in the lower Casamance region in southern Senegal, to warn Fadiga about the witchcraft she would inflict on Fadiga if she spoke out publicly about what had happened to her daughter. Fadiga was told to keep quiet about what had happened, or else she might lose her job. The girl who had shared what had happened with her stayed silent in order not to jeopardise her position in the national team. And the mother and her daughter, in turn, were both silenced by her coach: "*Sa maman reçoit des aliments, comme de l'huile et du riz, du coach chaque mois, en échange pour son silence*" (F: Her mother receives food supplies, like cooking oil and rice, from the coach monthly, in return for her silence), said Fadiga. Capitalising on their economic precarity, the coach had bought their silence to safeguard his own position in the team. When Fadiga shared what had happened with one of the female coaches, a woman she held in high esteem, she was disappointed by her response as she, too, refused to take any action against the coach. In order to avoid being seen as a troublemaker, and to protect her position in the football milieu, Fadiga decided to remain silent in this particular case. She did decide to speak out about the pervasiveness of sexual violence in women's football in a more general sense, during the press conference of a tournament that she had organised for all of Dakar's women's teams in 2022. She indirectly referred to the incident when she explained her commitment to women's football as being informed by the desire to change the culture of sexual violence in women's football. For 2023, Fadiga did not receive funding from the Senegalese Football Federation to organise a tournament again. She, too, had effectively been silenced by the people higher up in the organisation.

<sup>48</sup> Conversation with Fadiga, 23 February 2022.

Placing Fadiga's work, and that of AFP, in the larger political context of Senegal, which includes tensions around gender and sexuality and women's rights in public debates, reveals the constraints of women's agency. Global attention to women's rights and gender equality through sports brings opportunities for women, but the backlash against feminism, rising anti-queer sentiments and the broader gender panic that these are expressions of, also limit women's agency insofar as becoming associated with sexual rights or feminist movements can prove risky. The pushback that women footballers face when speaking out shows that a tacit acceptance of gender dissidence on the football field is at odds with growing public debates about gender equality and same-sex sexualities. Women's spaces for dissident expressions may in fact shrink with growing public debate about sexual rights. The ambivalent attitude towards women's football in the country means that women's behaviour on and off the pitch is scrutinised. Their sports mentality is valued, but the determination to be successful must not jeopardise their roles as women in society.

This ambivalence does provide room, however, for women like Fadiga to establish an association with the double objective of professionalising women's football while also creating space to discuss gender inequalities, sexual abuse by male coaches, and women's (same-sex) relationships. Their careful deliberations about how to approach their critique of abuse in women's football, including a debate about whether to collaborate with sexual rights organisations, demonstrates how women's agency to speak out publicly cannot be taken for granted. The women's reluctance to associate with *féministes* or with sexual rights organisations may help us to understand that engaging with public debates is not the preferred option for most women, and that other forms of agency may provide many more opportunities for women to live dissident lives. Maintaining a distance from sexual rights organisations provides room for ambiguity, and hence some space, and it helps women maintain respectability.

## Conclusion

The anti-queer protests of May 2021 and February 2022, and a general climate of gender panic in society, have had an impact on women's agency in the public sphere. Whether they are *féministes* like Nguenar, who had been working on a campaign for the legalisation of abortion, or women like Khady and Fadiga, who were committed to the development of women's football: all are aware of the risks of being associated with sexual rights activism. Following the trajectories of a number of *féministes* who engage in public debates about gender and sexuality, this chapter has demonstrated how certain forms and expressions of agency emerge where others face constraint. Women's agency in the public sphere has a rich history in Senegal. But while there have always been women who have been valued for their public leadership, the responses to *féministes* show how women's

agency is contested where they challenge the patriarchal status quo. The way in which women who have recently spoken out for the right to abortion have been treated in the media reveals how gender panic and anti-queer sentiments effectively silence women who become exposed as so-called wicked women.

When considering women's agency in the public sphere, a tension with the value of *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) becomes apparent. While *sutura* has always been an important value in the realm of sexuality, sexuality has now increasingly become a matter of public debate. Dissident sexualities in particular are, paradoxically, simultaneously silenced and loudly debated. The loudest opponents of so-called LGBTQI+ sexualities have no problems exposing people's intimate lives as they attack the supposed imposition of these sexualities in Senegalese society. Despite insisting on the importance of *sutura*, they cease to practice *sutura* themselves as they address questions of gender and sexuality overtly in demonstrations and in the media. *Sutura* remains an important value for people, and women in particular are judged for upholding it, yet there are also women who (temporarily) cease the practice of *sutura* in order to address social problems. Women relate differently to these discussions, and the effects on their public agency has been different too.

One cause of the different approaches of women vis-à-vis *sutura* and public debates relates to women's different positionalities. Fadiga does not occupy the same social positioning as Nguenar, Ramatoulaye, and Korka. She does not have the same levels of cultural and social capital: Fadiga is still a student and she has only recently become acquainted with sexual rights activism, whereas Nguenar, Ramatoulaye, and Korka have pursued tertiary education and have been active in women's rights activism for years now. Moreover, even though Fadiga works with the Senegalese Football Federation, she occupies a precarious position there. Directly critiquing the Federation could cost her her job, and she does not have a large social network to draw support from for her activism. Nguenar, Ramatoulaye, and Korka, on the other hand, either work for international organisations or receive funding from such organisations for their feminist activism.<sup>49</sup> The opportunities to speak up that *féministes* seize, however, come with pitfalls too. In a tense socio-political context in which anti-queer sentiments are loudly voiced, and discussions of gender equality become cast as an ideological trap of the West that supposedly seeks to impose an LGBT agenda, discussions about same-sex sexualities and sexual rights have opened up a new field of tension in women's and feminist movements. The tensions that emerge from such discussions illuminate the shifting contours of supposed wickedness. Contemporary debates show that rumours of same-sex intimacies cause women to be stigmatised as "wicked," and that such accusations effectively work to silence *féministes*.

<sup>49</sup> I am purposefully vague about Fadiga's exact position within the women's football domain, as this would make her easily traceable.

Women who engage with public debates about gender, sexuality, and women's rights, express one form of agency. "Most Senegalese women," however, "are unable or unwilling to adopt a style of agency characterised by overt collective resistance, radicalism, or rupture" (Bop 2010, 214). They respond to, and navigate, gender norms and gender panic differently. They stay away from public debates, and instead draw upon the affordances of silences to live their lives as supposedly wicked women. Their distance to public debates can have different reasons, including the fact that the debates do not capture well the reality of their everyday lives, or because these women simply do not have the same resources that the *féministes* who I foregrounded in this chapter have. In a context of gender panic and anti-queer sentiments, speaking out publicly is risky, and it is certainly not an available, or even desirable, option for many women. Others, probably most, go under the radar. In the next chapter, I zoom in on women who are seeking other, more discreet ways of navigating societal expectations and their own desires and dissident practices. Instead of *ceasing* the practice of *sutura* like women in this chapter have shown, they *seize* some of its affordances to create space for their dissidence.

## **CHAPTER 2**

“It is better to be  
a trickster in our  
hypocritical society”:<sup>50</sup>  
Crafting “wicked” lives



Contrary to *féministes* who engage in public debates to advance their position in society, other women choose to avoid the spotlight. Women's agency in pushing back against gender norms is not limited to speaking out publicly, or to feminist activism. In this chapter, I present women who largely avoid the public sphere as they shape their dissident lives. Instead of *ceasing* the practice of *sutura*, they *seize* its affordances to create and navigate space for their dissident lives (Oudenhuisen 2021b). In the chapters that follow, I analyse women's agency that is distinct and distant from public debates about gender and sexuality. In the interstices between anti-queer sentiments and vocal feminist activism, many of my interlocutors make use of ambiguity and elusiveness to pursue and persist in gender and sexual dissidence. Because the women in this chapter do not adhere to a politics of confrontation or a struggle for sexual rights, their practices often escape the view of academic research and policymakers, although they may be tacitly known in their communities. Remaining distant from, and silent about, public debates about gender and sexuality is crucial in a time where such debates become increasingly tense. Although public debates are not central to the lives of most of my interlocutors, they do influence their opportunities to live so-called wicked lives. Silence, Malhotra and Rowe (2013, 2) write, "allows us the freedom of not having to exist constantly in reaction to what is said." It allows people to survive by "not coming into full view" (Ahmed 2021, 304).

Not coming into full view is about more than keeping silent about one's dissident practices, or staying away from overt debates about sexual rights. It is also about being able to adjust to different situations. Supposedly wicked women resemble what Kwame Otu (2022) refers to as "amphibious subjects": subjects who are able to move between and across different terrains, adjusting their appearances and attitudes where needed, while enjoying what all these different contexts offer them in terms of finding belonging, friendship, education, knowledge, and opportunities for work. Amphibious subjectivity, Otu argues, is a form of "queer self-making" that is characterised by a multiplicity of embodied forms, spaces and language identifications. Such fluidity helps people to escape labelling, and this is helpful for navigating gendered expectations. Women draw upon a variety of modalities to maintain elusiveness and ambiguity around their persona, activities and relationships. To explore how they do so, the following question guides this chapter: *How do elusiveness and ambiguity enable women to craft liveable lives as "wicked" women?*

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Arame, 30 September 2020. Her original quote in French is: "*Mieux vaut être un tricheur dans notre société hypocrite.*"

The capacity to take on multiple forms and to invent and reinvent strategies to get by are indispensable abilities of life in the postcolonial era, particularly since the 1980s, after economic crises and Structural Adjustment Programmes transformed African economies (Banégas and Warnier 2001; Mbembe 2001). In Senegal, such resourcefulness has been captured in the idea of the “Wolofisation” of Senegalese society. Scholars identified this process of Wolofisation as referring to a process of social transformation whereby more and more people speak Wolof and adopt Wolof cultural values and ideas of success, as a consequence of the economic crisis that hit Senegal in the 1980s (Cruise O’Brien 1998; M. Ndiaye 1998). Where the French language had previously secured people jobs with the early postcolonial state, Wolof became the language of survival in urban Senegal in a context of economic crisis (ibid.). In the early post-independence period, *les évolués* (F: the civilised ones) or *ku jàng ekool* (W: those who have been to school) – who had enjoyed formal education in French – were the groups who had access to social and political success, as they held positions in the French-speaking government, or had reasonably well-renumerated and well-respected jobs in education (M. Ndiaye 1998). The economic crisis and the ensuing Structural Adjustment Programmes resulted in a decline of the state, which subsequently led to a dwindling status of the francophone intellectual elite. The Wolofisation of Senegalese society was characterised by the emergence of a new elite of entrepreneurs. Referred to as *Móodu Móodu*, these successful urban entrepreneurs challenged the ideal of success through schooling and employment as a civil servant that *évolués* or *ku jàng ekool* previously embodied (ibid.). *Móodu Móodu* reveal a process of social transformation whereby diplomas are no longer a guarantee for success, but where innovation, risk-taking and a practical *savoir faire* can get you far. The fact that it is hard work to succeed in tying ends together, becomes apparent from the many popular expressions in Wolof that emphasise the role of work in having success (Havard 2001). Such expressions include “*liggéey, liggéey rekk*” (W: work, work only [to succeed]), “*jëf jël*” (W: if you work, you win), and “*ñax jareñu*” (W: only sweat pays). Such new roads to success point at the moral economy of resourcefulness that has proven to be crucial in postcolonial Senegal.

In *Bricoler pour survivre*, Abdou Salam Fall (2007) provides further insight into the many ways in which Senegal’s urban poor tie together various economic activities and social networks. He argues how the industriousness of people who collect and resell plastic waste for recycling, or who craft stoves with the little threads and pieces of metal that they collect from construction sites, are indispensable for millions of households that survive on a couple of euros a day. These *débrouillards* are indispensable industrious figures in an urban context that does not *a priori* value their contributions to the economy. The word *débrouillard* does not have a singular translation into English, but it appeals to the inventiveness, streetwiseness, and resourcefulness of people to get by under challenging circumstances. The *débrouillard* resembles the hustler, a concept that is also often used

in relation to masculine providerhood in a context of material precarity and racial discrimination (Van Stapele 2021). The *débrouillard* or hustler is not only concerned with earning an income, but also with their positioning in the family and in society. People's strategies to survive in the city are born out of material precarity, but they have also become a way of life.

Where a moral economy of resourcefulness is part of the everyday survival for millions of Senegalese, I contend that gender- and sexually dissident women have to add an extra layer to this resourcefulness: they also need to navigate a moral economy of not-knowing, which I define as the moral obligations of people to uphold ambiguities concerning dissident practices. The space for dissident practices depends on your, and your family's, ability to maintain a sense of not-knowing around such practices. A moral economy of not-knowing connects those who conceal to those from whom something is concealed, because the latter take an active part in maintaining a not-knowing (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020), or because they are presumed to be wanting to know about that which is withheld from them (Kirsch 2015). Not-knowing is not about not knowing per se, but about the decision to not acknowledge the knowing explicitly, so as to avoid open conflict. Maintaining a sense of not-knowing about others' situations is a moral choice that expresses care for others (De Klerk 2012). Drawing upon Smart (2011), Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk (2020) speak of a "choreography of secrecy" to signal the active participation of all the actors who are concerned with keeping a secret. In this choreography, relational dynamics and hierarchies of age, gender, and class inform how the dance of secrecy is danced, in addition to existing cultural norms of discretion and verbal indirection (Dankwa 2009; Hardon and Posel 2012). I explore the different modalities by which women maintain a sense of not-knowing, in an attempt to capture how women craft dissident lives.

### **"It is better to be a trickster": The use of humour and deceit to navigate stigma**

I start with the story of Ndella and Arame, two women who were respectively in their mid-twenties and early thirties when I met them in 2020.<sup>51</sup> They were in a relationship with each other, and they shared with me how they have managed to sustain their relationship by coming up with *pexe jigéen* (W: women's solutions) whenever problems arise. The idea of women's solutions reflects the fact that women, more than men, are under moral scrutiny for their behaviour, and that this requires particular solutions to dodge accusations and to avoid stigma. *Pexe jigéen* was a recurring phrase that I heard when women told me how they had navigated a particular struggle with their families or in-laws.

<sup>51</sup> All names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.

I turn to ideas about trickster figures from older anthropological literature to understand how women like Ndella and Arame navigated accusations of so-called wickedness, and how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis societal expectations. Trickster tales are found in cultures around the globe and they have appeared in many different guises, from Anansi the spider in West Africa to Prometheus in Ancient Greece, and in the forms of coyote and the hare in North American indigenous cultures (Edmonson 1970). In storytelling around the world, the trickster has been described as a figure who devises strategies to make it out of challenging circumstances by outsmarting others. Tricksters are variously described as being clever, creative, deceitful, and selfish. They outsmart others, breaking rules and transgressing taboos along the way. They are either considered a “culture hero,” whose actions are at the service of humanity, a “selfish buffoon,” who violates the most fundamental of social values for personal gain, or a combination of both (Boas 1974[1898]; Lowie 1909; Radin 1972). Tricksters are ultimately ambiguous characters and they have the “ability to live interstitially, to confuse and to escape the structures of society and the order of cultural things” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 148).

Trickster tales reflect strategies of resistance and survival under adverse conditions, and they have travelled from West Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas with the slave trade (Levine 1977). In these different stories, trickster characters find ways to overcome alienating conditions through their creativity and wit. In such tales, trickster figures are “weak, relatively powerless creatures who attain their ends through the application of native wit and guile rather than power or authority” (ibid., 103).

I am interested in the trickster as a living person who is embedded in their own social environment. The trickster’s capacities to embody ambiguities, flexibility, and indeterminacy is important in a context in which people’s behaviour is increasingly policed. The trickster embodies the contradiction and friction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint, and they reveal the tension between the moral demands of communal life and people’s individual desires. Trickster behaviour is, by the way, not a particular characteristic of so-called wicked women. Evoking the concept of “*une économie morale de la ruse et de la débrouille*” (F: a moral economy of cunning and resourcefulness), Banégas and Warnier (2001, 8) argue that new figures of economic and social success in post-SAP (Structural Adjustment Programmes) Africa include Cameroonian *feyman* and Mauretanian *tcheb-tchab*, who “elevat[ed] scam to the rank of an art of living” (ibid., 11).

How do women like Ndella and Arame make use of trickery to survive, and what social tensions does this bring to the surface? Ndella was twenty-six years old when I met her in 2020. Born in a suburb of Dakar in a poor family, she grew up first with her grandparents in a village, and later with a paternal aunt in Dakar. Since 2019, she

has been living with her girlfriend Arame, and Arame's family, in Thiès. Both Ndella's parents are *débrouillards*, who earn a living with odd jobs. Ndella has two older and two younger siblings, all four of whom grew up with their parents. When Ndella was two years old, she was sent to her maternal grandparents in a village north of Dakar. It was an investment in the future, to ensure that at least one of the children would receive an education. Some families send some children to school while keeping others at home. Others send children to work at a young age, and yet others send children from the same family to different types of schools for different lengths of time. All of these are strategies as families navigate economic precarity and aspirations for their children's and their own futures in Senegal (Grysole 2018). Because of a lack of financial resources, her parents first sent Ndella to her grandparents in the village. During her time with her grandparents, Ndella attended a Quran school. Islamic education is believed to teach children important values that will lead to more solidarity and help for kin later in life. It is also thought to provide children with *baraka* (divine blessing) which is necessary for their success in life (Buggenhagen 2001). After six years of Quranic schooling in the village of her grandparents, she returned to Dakar, to live with her aunt and uncle, who then enrolled Ndella in a public French school. Child fostering, the practice of children growing up with relatives other than their biological parents, is a common practice in Senegal (Vandermeersch 2002) as well as in other parts of West Africa (Alber, Martin and Notermans 2013; Alber 2018; Goody 1982). Children are fostered out to relatives or friends for purposes of education, or because fostering out children is believed to strengthen the relationships between the adults. Women may furthermore be given a child if she has not birthed herself. The ubiquity of fostering practices does not mean, however, that it does not lead to conflicts. In Ndella's case, the fact that she outperformed her cousin at school, obtaining her BFEM exam (exams at the end of middle school) when her cousin failed those same exams, was a reason for her aunt to stop paying Ndella's tuition fees, arguing that the private school that Ndella was attending had become too expensive. Ndella did not believe that they really could not bear the costs anymore, for it was her uncle who lived abroad who was paying for her school fees.

Nevertheless, to reduce the financial burden on her family, Ndella decided to switch to a public high school. The year before her exams, however, she wanted to switch back to a private school. The turn towards private schooling is common in Senegal, where strikes continually disrupt the education at underfunded public schools (Grysole 2018). When she discussed this wish with her aunt, she initially agreed. When the school fees were due, however, her aunt said nothing. In November, all her classmates had started the school year, but Ndella could not join them because her school fees had not been paid. She decided to pay her school fees herself: 65,000 FCFA (100 euros) registration costs and 35,000 FCFA (53 euros) at the end of every month. *"C'est en ce moment que j'ai commencé à fréquenter les hommes quoi"* (F: It was at this time that I started seeing men),

she said, chuckling. “*J’avais des copains, je faisais le mbaraan*” (F : I had boyfriends, I did *mbaraan*). *Mbaraan* refers to sexual relationships in exchange for material support in the form of gifts or money (Foley and Dramé 2013). Although practicing *mbaraan* enabled Ndella to go back to school to attend her exam year, she still missed a lot of classes, particularly at the end of the month, when she was concerned with collecting the money for the next month’s school fees. Her aunt saw her leave the house in her school uniform every day, but she never directly asked Ndella where she got the money from. Her silence was a deliberate form of not-knowing, which is indicative of the relationality of secrecy (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020). Ndella likewise said nothing, so people must have thought that her aunt was paying her school fees. Ndella failed her *baccalauréat* exams (exams at the end of high school) two years in a row, after which she decided to drop out of school in 2017. When she went home to her parents to celebrate Tabaski (Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice) that same year, she stayed. No one batted an eye when she just stayed after the feast was over. Her aunt did not call her to ask her when she was coming back for the school year. “She continued doing *mbaraan*, to be able to pay rent for a room with her brother at her parents’ place.” Arame: “*Tu faisais le mbaraan pour régler tes problèmes!*” (F: You did *mbaraan* to solve your problems!) To which Ndella responded,

*Ah, si tu me voyais, tu n’allais pas penser que j’avais ces problèmes. Tu allais même penser que je suis une fille d’une grande famille, elle manque de rien... gâtée. Parce que c’est ce que j’incarnais. J’avais pas de soucis, je m’habillais bien* (F: Ah, if you saw me, you would not think I had any problems. You would even think that I was a girl from an important family, who lacked nothing... spoiled. Because that is what I embodied. I had no problems, I dressed well).

Appearance meant more to her than just the desire to dress well. It was a way to survive in a family that she felt had abandoned her. Her reference to embodying that she was well-to-do is important for maintaining a sense of dignity, which so many of my interlocutors referred to as an important driver for how they navigated social and material precarity.

The fact that Ndella did *mbaraan* was not directly considered a problem by her family. As long as she helped solve her family’s financial problems, they did not bother where the money came from. When Ndella spent her money on herself, however, the response was different. She recalled how, as a teenager, she liked to go out with her friends to the city or to the beach, instead of staying at home with her family. One day, after such an outing, her father had called her *caga* (W: “prostitute”). Calling women *caga* expresses a fear and condemnation of uncontrollable women, especially when they are found to keep their income to themselves instead of sharing it with their family. Prostitution in itself may not always be perceived as a problem, but the way that earnings are spent is

scrutinised by family members. It is the expectation of reciprocity that undergirds the (dis)qualification of prostitution. In a study of prostitution in colonial Nairobi, White (1990) argued how prostitution was not always met with disapproval: in the 1930s, among the Kikuyu, prostitution was seen as a legitimate means for women to earn an income, if the revenues of this work were directed to family livestock herds that had been lost due to droughts. If women used the money to make a living independent of the patriarchal family, however, the practice provoked disapproval. The independence with which Ndella disposed of her financial means, going out with friends, and beyond the sphere of control of her family, had earned her the accusation of *caga*.

Later, when she had started dating Arame, who paid for her school fees, and who often picked her up with her car, she was called a *caga* again. Ndella's family accused Arame of "buying" their daughter into "lesbianism" with the gifts that she bought for her, and the professional training that she was sponsoring for her. With her money, Arame supposedly "*détournait*" Ndella (the French verb *détourner* means to turn away, deflect, seize control). The phrase *détournement de mineurs* (F: diversion of minors) regularly features in news articles as a conviction in court for rape or sexual harassment committed against a minor. It is also part of a discourse about "homosexuality" that suggests that innocent children and teenagers are lured into "homosexuality" or "lesbianism," especially by someone with money (and additionally perhaps with the promise of travel to the West). It reveals the anxieties of parents losing control over their children's life decisions, and it expresses a fear that this further worsens their already precarious economic situation (Pierce 2016).

Ndella and Arame met each other and started dating in March 2018. Ndella was introduced to Arame via a mutual friend, to whom Ndella had expressed her interest to "*découvrir ce que font les filles entre filles quoi. Avec la sexualité et tout... mais je veux pas être ça*" (F: discover what girls do among girls, you know. With sexuality and all... but I don't want to be that). She recounted how she had become curious, "*parce qu'il y avait beaucoup de rumeurs en ce moment au Sénégal. Les gens parlaient des lesbiennes tout le temps. Donc je me suis posée la question, comment font les filles entre elles?*" (F: Because there were a lot of rumours at that moment in Senegal. People spoke about *lesbiennes* all the time. So, I asked myself, how do girls do it?) And so the two met, and although Ndella had been clear at the start that she was not looking for love but simply to discover sex with a woman, things turned out differently, and the two started a relationship soon after.

When the two met each other, Ndella was still in a relationship with a man, with whom she planned to get married. After a couple of weeks into her relationship with Arame, Ndella discovered that she was pregnant. Arame tried to convince her to keep the baby, because it would provide her some more room for a relationship with Arame. Ndella was afraid, however, of what people would say when they would find out that

she had got pregnant before marriage. With these considerations on her mind, Arame and Ndella decided to talk to the man and ask him to marry the pregnant Ndella. If they married quickly, people would not have to find out that she had been pregnant before their marriage.

On the day that they spoke to him, he seemed to understand and accept the situation. The day after, however, he called Arame and he asked her to confirm that Ndella was pregnant. Sensing that he was recording their conversation, which he could use to cause Ndella trouble, Arame denied Ndella's pregnancy and the conversation they had had the day before. She quickly warned Ndella about what had transpired, and, indeed, the man then called Ndella to ask about her pregnancy. She also denied it and said that the pregnancy test that they had showed him had belonged to a friend. Because it was April, the two had fooled him with an April fool's joke, they said. After this conversation, Ndella decided definitively to have an abortion. A friend put her in touch with a doctor who does abortions in his private clinic. Before she could have this abortion, however, her boyfriend tried to get Ndella into trouble by telling her family that she was pregnant. Ndella had forgotten her mother's health booklet in his car. He thought that it was Ndella's own health booklet. He called Ndella's sister and told her about Ndella's pregnancy, arguing that he even had the proof with her health booklet. Lucid as she was, Ndella thought about a way to prove to her sister that she was not pregnant: she put some betadine on a sanitary pad before heading home. While recounting this story to me, she and Arame laughed, and Arame exclaimed: "*Pexe jigéen, quoi! Elle est une vraie tricheuse!*" (W/F: Women's solutions! She's a real trickster!) He had attempted to trick Ndella, but Ndella and Arame outsmarted him by creating "evidence" for their story.

Having found a way to fool her boyfriend and her family about her pregnancy, Ndella additionally tricked her boyfriend by claiming that he had never given her money for commerce. He had bought cosmetics, wigs, and handbags worth about 1000 euros for her to sell. After the pregnancy situation, he asked for them back but she denied that he had ever given her anything. She had safely stored the goods, which she had indeed been selling one by one. The revenues allowed her to "*arranger mes petits problèmes*" (F: arrange my small problems). Although he could not prove what he had given to Ndella, he did call a police officer in an attempt to get the goods back. Ndella used the pregnancy situation against him, and argued to the police officer that her boyfriend had also tried to deceive and shame her by falsely claiming that she was pregnant. Recalling this memory of how the two had tricked Ndella's boyfriend and her family together made them laugh, because they had indeed been humorously deceitful. "*En ce moment j'étais une vraie actrice. Je tournais des films kay, comme pas possible!*" (F: At that moment I was a real actress. I was shooting incredible movies!).



Arame's assertion that Ndella is a trickster helps us to understand Ndella's acts to get out of the situation with her boyfriend and her pregnancy as tactics of humour and deceit. Ndella refused to take the sole responsibility for her pregnancy. Her boyfriend would soon return to Canada, where he also resided, and Ndella would be left to deal with the stigma of having a child out of wedlock. The way she handled this, making sure to avoid the stigma of a pre-marital pregnancy, but also still drawing a maximum amount of profit from the fact that he was considerably wealthier and had offered her products to sell, is indicative of Banégas and Warnier's (2001, 8) characterisation of much life in postcolonial Senegal as marked by a moral economy of cunning and resourcefulness.

Later on in their relationship, other problems emerged, for which their quick wit did not suffice as a solution. Soon after she had handled the situation with her by then ex-boyfriend, it was her friend who had introduced her to Arame who got her in trouble. Ndella had left some of the goods that her boyfriend had bought for her with this friend, who had helped sell the products, for which she would give part of the revenues to Ndella. When Ndella dropped by to collect her money, her friend refused to pay her. Thinking that it was a money issue, Ndella told her friend not to worry and to keep the money. When she noticed, however, that her friend started ignoring her when they ran into each other in their neighbourhood, she understood that the concern was not financial. Recounting how she lost her long-time friend, Ndella said:

*Ici, on n'aime pas partager nos amies. Elle a dit à sa maman qu'elle ne voulait plus me fréquenter, parce qu'elle avait découvert qu'on est des lesbiennes. Puis, sa maman a vu ma sœur. Elle lui a raconté: 'il faut que tu dises à Ndella qu'elle arrête de fréquenter Arame, parce que Arame n'est pas bien, elle est lesbienne.' Voilà... ma sœur, puisque elle ne garde rien, elle est allée dire ça à ma maman. Les gens commençaient à m'ignorer. Moi je ne savais rien. Mais je vois que tout le monde change quoi (F: Here, we don't like to share our friends. She told her mother that she did not want to see me anymore because she had found out that Arame and I were lesbiennes. Then, her mother met my sister. She told her: 'you should tell Ndella to stop seeing Arame, because Arame is not a good person, she is a lesbienne.' My sister, because she doesn't keep anything to herself, told everything to my mother. People started ignoring me, but I had no clue what was going on. But slowly I saw that everyone was changing).*

Exposing Ndella and Arame as *lesbiennes* was a way for her friend to hurt Ndella. Ndella was initially not alarmed by the fact that her family hardly spoke to her. She had not developed very close relationships with her parents or siblings because she had not grown up with them. One day, however, her parents called her and said that they wanted to talk to her. Ndella recounted that,

*Ils n'ont pas prononcé le mot, mais ils ont dit: 'il faut que tu arrêtes li ngay dox. Tu traînes beaucoup dans la rue. Tu ne passes pas la journée. On ne sait pas où tu es. Tu as des matériels qu'on ne peut pas t'acheter. Tu as un téléphone cher.' Ils ont commencé par ça quoi. J'ai rien dit. J'étais surprise quoi. Pourquoi maintenant? Ici, les gens savent que tu fais ça, mbaraan, mais puisque tu apportes quelque chose, on ne dit rien. Après ils ont continué: 'on ne veut plus te voir avec ta copine là, Arame.' La nak, j'ai dit non (F: They didn't pronounce the word, but they said: 'you have to stop li ngay dox (W: the way you're behaving). You hang around on the streets a lot. You don't spend the day at home. We don't know where you are. You have things that we cannot buy for you. You have an expensive phone.' They started with that. I didn't say anything. I was surprised. Why now? Here, people know that you're doing that, mbaraan, but as long as you provide for things, people don't say anything. And then they continued: 'we don't want to see you anymore with your (girl)friend, Arame.'<sup>52</sup> There, however, I said no).*

Her parents' phrasing of Ndella's behaviour as "li ngay dox" (W: what you're doing, the way you're behaving) can be a discreet way of referring to (sexual) behaviour that is unspeakable. *Dox* (W: to walk, to move) is also used to criticise a woman's movement in public space, beyond their family's control. Here, Ndella's parents may have criticised her for leaving the house too much, and for engaging in relationships and activities that they had no grip on and that they could not take part in. Their problem with Ndella's relationship with Arame may have principally been a question of money and control, and less about their supposed same-sex intimacies, at least initially. Ndella explained that,

*Peut-être ils savaient pas de l'existence [des relations amoureuses entre femmes]. Ils sont pas trop dans les réseaux sociaux. Ils savent pas ce qui se passe, qu'il y a des filles qui sont ensembles. Ma maman elle ignore tout [...] Mon papa nak, c'est en ce moment qu'il a répété le mot qu'il m'avait dit quand j'avais... je pense que j'avais onze ans. En ce moment il m'avait traité de caga [...] Plus tard, quand mon oncle m'avait convoqué pour une autre réunion avec la famille, ils ont demandé si Arame était une lesbienne. J'étais furieuse qu'ils m'avaient convoqué juste pour parler de ça. Ma mère a commencé à crier: 'ne me parle pas! On veut plus jamais te parler! Toi... ce que tu vis, on le sait tous!' (F: Maybe they didn't know the existence [of romantic relationships between women]. They are not very connected to social media. They don't know what's happening, that there are women who are together. My mother ignores everything [...] My father, however, it was at this moment that he repeated the word he used when I was... I think I was eleven years old. At this moment he called me caga [...] Later on, when my uncle summoned me for another family meeting, they asked me if Arame was a lesbienne. I was furious that they had summoned me just to talk*

<sup>52</sup> The French word "copine" can mean both female friend and girlfriend.

about this. My mother started screaming: 'don't talk to me! We don't want to talk to you again ever! You... what you are living, we all know it!').

A few days later, the situation had escalated further, and Ndella heard kids in her neighbourhood yell as she passed, "*Xool leen ki, faram jigéen la!*" (W: Look at her, her boyfriend is a girl!). This was when she realised that everyone knew. When she returned home in the evening, she talked to her mother once more. She started screaming again and, because it was late at night, neighbours came out to see what was happening. "*Nu mu tudd? Gouine, affaire yooyu... Elle a utilisé le mot*" (W/F: What's it called? Dyke, that stuff... She used the word). That is when she called Arame, who came to pick her up. The two left to stay with friends in another city for a couple of nights, after which Ndella moved in with Arame and her family in yet another city.

Although her family came after her to ask her to come back, the two managed to convince their families that Ndella had to stay in Thiès for work purposes. When Ndella did move in with them, Arame's mother convened the two women in her room and, Arame recounted, "*Elle nous a traité de tous les noms, elle nous a tout dit. 'Vous faites pas ça, vous êtes des femmes... tout le monde raconte n'importe quoi.' Mais tout le monde l'aime dans la maison. Elle a été une personne adorable. Maintenant on nous laisse*" (F: She called us all sorts of names. She told us everything. 'You don't do these things, you are women... people are saying all sorts of things, you know.' But everyone in the house loves her. She has been an adorable person. Now they leave us alone). Worried about what Ndella's stay with them would do to the image others have of Arame and the family, Arame's mother felt that she had to make clear to them that they should be concerned with how they behave, and with how others perceive them.

While they were at ease with Arame's family, Ndella's family continued to pressure Ndella to move back to Dakar. Ndella's mother emphasised that she still expected Ndella to get married. By then, Arame had started talking to her about the Yàlla-Yàlla, a sub group of the religious Murid brotherhood that she belonged to. Ndella accepted Arame's invitation to join her to gatherings of the Yàlla-Yàlla, where she met her future husband. He was Arame's *marabout* (religious guide), and he and Arame had been dating previously. Arame introduced Ndella to the *marabout*, who quickly showed romantic interest in her. When they became close, Arame was initially upset, but quickly realised that it could be good for Ndella to date him, and perhaps even marry him. And indeed, a couple of months into their relationship, he married Ndella. The two do not spend much time together, and Ndella has continued living with Arame. Since their marriage, Ndella said, "*Tout est ok dans la famille. Il n'y a plus de problèmes. Personne ne soupçonne plus rien. C'est une bonne couverture*" (F: But since then, everything is ok in the family. There are no more problems. Nobody suspects anything anymore. It's a good cover).

To which Arame confirmed,

*Le respect est revenu quoi. On va ensemble là où on veut. Donc tout est ok, quoi. Manaam [W: c'est-à-dire], ils ont oublié toutes les histoires. Ils se disent que, bon, elle est mariée quoi. Maintenant, pourquoi j'ai accepté le mariage de Ndella avec le marabout? Il m'a carrément avoué qu'il était amoureux d'elle. Et qu'il lui voulait aucun mal. Moi aussi... même si nous étions ensemble, il y a toujours quelques rumeurs. Sa mère qui lui dit: il faut avoir un mari. Donc il y a des choses quoi. Elle n'était pas carrément en sécurité. Il nous restait un tout petit peu. Et si Ndella peut le supporter un tout petit peu, pourquoi pas se marier avec lui pour faire plaisir aux parents et à la société? Et ce serait une belle couverture pour nous. On peut vivre ce qu'on vit, sans que les autres s'en rendent compte (F: Respect has come back. We go together wherever we want. So everything is ok, you know. That is to say, they have forgotten all the stories. Now, why I accepted Ndella's marriage to the marabout? He told me straight out that he was in love with her. And that he meant her no harm. Me too... and even if we were together, there are still some rumours... her mother who tells her that she should have a husband. So there are things. She wasn't exactly safe. There was still something for us to do. And I said to myself, if Ndella can stand him a little bit, why not marry him, to please the parents and society. It would be a nice cover for us. We can continue what we are doing, without others noticing).*

Ndella's marriage to the *marabout* had been a sacrifice that had allowed them to continue their relationship. They had considered another option, namely travel to Europe, but they had realised that this would be too complicated. Arame said,

*C'est pour ça qu'on a choisi cette méthode. Parce que ça fait mal aussi de se voir tout le temps indexé par les gens. Que les gens te regardent d'un autre œil. Ça fait mal. Mieux vaut nak, être un tricheur, comme on vit dans notre société hypocrite. Qu'est-ce que tu peux faire? Mieux vaut être un tricheur comme eux. Pourtant c'est ça... ce que tu vis, c'est personnel, c'est pas la peine d'écrire ici 'Je suis lesbienne.' C'est quoi, pour que les gens sachent? Si on avait pu voyager, on n'aurait même pas pensé à ce mariage. Mais c'était la meilleure option (F: That's why we chose this method [of having a child with their marabout]. Because it hurts to be critiqued all the time. That people look at you differently. That hurts. It is better to be a trickster, as we live in our hypocritical society. What can you do? It is better to be a trickster like them. That's it you know... it is personal, it makes no sense to write here [she points at her forehead] 'I am a lesbienne.' What is that, so that people know? If we could have travelled, we would not even have thought about this marriage. But it was the best available option).<sup>53</sup>*

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Ndella and Arame, 30 September 2020.

That Ndella and Arame thought that marriage was the best option to regain respect from their families is no surprise. Marriage and parenthood remain central to obtaining adult status in Senegal (Gilbert 2017). Marriage remains the only socially accepted union from which families can be built, and cohabitation without marriage is frowned upon. Women in particular are stigmatised for perceived promiscuity when they live independently from their families or a husband. Marriage also carries religious importance, as people believe that it is through marriage that a woman can access heaven (Dial 2008; Gilbert 2017). Globalisation and urbanisation have led to changing ideas about marriage, and among young urbanites, polygyny and the idea of marriage as a contract between two families are losing appeal. Middle-class women increasingly emphasise companionate marriage and emotional proximity (Neveu Kringelbach 2016), and, as a result of economic precarity and high emigration rates, an increasing number of people find themselves in transnational marriages (Hannaford and Foley 2015). The facts that marriage nevertheless remains a central social and religious expectation in Senegal, and women who have passed their twenties constantly feel the pressure to marry, does not mean that women do not find ways around marriage (Miller 2024). Women's possibilities to postpone, forgo, or end their marriages depend on their ability to perform other gendered norms such as caring for kin, and raising an income to provide for parents and other family members. As the story of Ndella and Arame shows, marriage does not signal an end to same-sex relationships; moreover, marriages can also be entered strategically. Their consideration of the options to travel abroad, and to marry the *marabout* were attempts to enhance their possibilities of living together and fulfilling their dreams. These dreams certainly included living together as a couple, and to have a family together, but they also included professional ambitions. Ndella's marriage to their *marabout* was not only the best available option for the two to have a child, but it also helped them, said Arame,

*Pour avoir la paix. On vise loin, on vise à devenir des personnes publiques. On veut avoir un impact dans la société, occuper certaines rôles. C'était évident qu'on devait le faire, parce qu'ici, on juge l'apparence. Donc tout ce que tu peux faire pour masquer tes erreurs, tu le fais, si tu veux être une figure publique. Tu comprends? Si un jour je serai un ministre, ou quoi que ce soit, les gens diront comme: 'Ndax xam ngeen lesbienne la woon?' C'est sûr que les gens vont sortir et dire aux autres, 'tu vois cette femme? C'est une lesbienne, je la connais bien' (F/W: To be at peace. We aim far, we aim to become public figures. We want to have an impact on society, and occupy certain public positions. So, it was evident that we needed to do this. Because here, we judge on the basis of appearances. So, everything you can do to cover up your mistakes, you will do it, if you aim to become a public figure. Do you understand that? If one day I will be a minister, or whatever, people can be like: 'Do you know that she was a lesbienne?' It is for sure that people will come out and tell others 'do you see that woman? She is a lesbienne, I know her well').*

“Et ça détruit ton image” (F: And that destroys your image), Ndella added.

To avoid a tainted image, Ndella and Arame have shown a wide range of *pexe jigéen* (W: women’s solutions): creative responses to navigate dissident desires, material precarity, family expectations, and the looming threat of stigmatisation. Ndella’s decision to practice *mbaraan* was informed by a desire for financial autonomy, for having the possibility to pursue one’s own choice of education, and for maintaining a sense of dignity – making a good impression in the eyes of others. The way the story unfolded, with Ndella first being called *caga* and later *lesbienne* together with Arame, to being told to “stop what she was doing,” shows the risk of her family actively not-knowing turning into overt stigma when relationships are not carefully managed according to the expectations of reciprocity. Ndella and Arame had to navigate the tensions of becoming “known” (exposed) as *lesbiennes* in a context of anti-queer sentiments, which have changed the ways in which women’s relationships are viewed. To do so, they had to craft other solutions, such as Ndella’s marriage to their *marabout*, so that their families would stop being concerned by their relationship. Arame’s suggestion that “it is better to be a trickster like them,” points at the trickster’s capacity to hold up a mirror to society. The trickster plays with people’s perceptions, appearing to others in a certain way while also remaining elusive. The trickster reveals that an appearance is sometimes just that: an external show, an impression that does not necessarily reflect the full reality. Again, not allowing yourself to be in full view might be how you survive.

### ***Kóoba*: Knowledge of the night**

Ndella, who had done *mbaraan*, first to pay her own school fees, and later to pay her rent and to solve her family’s financial issues, reveals how *mbaraan* can be a form of transgressing gender norms for women as they take control over their sexual, emotional, and economic lives to accomplish their own ends. People engage in commercial sex, Hunter (2002, 101) argues, “not as passive victims, but in order to access power and resources that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures.” *Mbaraan* is identified in Dakar as a recent phenomenon and the term itself has only been in circulation since the 1990s (Morales-Libove 2005). Urban poverty has made various forms of sexual-economic exchange, including *mbaraan*, common practice, and these have come to play an important role in the lives of many young women as they seek ways to get by (Biaya 2001). Abdou Salam Fall (2007, 169) describes *mbaraan* as “une forme de partenariat multiple développé avec des soupirants dans un jeu de négociation informelle en entretenant l’espoir auprès du partenaire occasionnel de son choix privilégié... permet aux filles... de se faire dépanner financièrement” (F: form of multiple partnership developed with suitors in a game of informal negotiation by keeping the hope alive with the occasional partner that he is the preferred choice... [which] allows women to be supported financially). *Mbaraan* may have its origins in

women's habits of gathering multiple suitors who would enter into competition with one another to win the love of this woman (Aduayi-Diop 2010). By showering her with gifts, they would try to outcompete their rivals. This "game of negotiation" (F: *jeu de négociation*) (Fall 2007, 169) alludes to the ambiguity and fleetingness of women's positions in these relationships.

*Mbaraan* is thus related to resourcefulness. According to Fouquet (2007), the social and moral legitimacy of *mbaraan* comes with women's craftiness and resourcefulness with respect to navigating multiple boyfriends simultaneously without visibly displaying an interest in material gains of money and gifts. Playing this game is not only about extracting money from male partners, but it also relates to the craftiness to maintain ambiguity of one's intimate relationships vis-à-vis family. Elusiveness and ambiguity are key to such craftiness and they manifest in the mobility of women's residence, the multiplicity of names and appellations they adopt, their work, and the networks of friends that they tap into at different moments. Although *mbaraaneuses* (women practicing *mbaraan*) are considered to be materialistic and unscrupulous, they are not as badly perceived as "prostitutes" (Fouquet 2011). Partly, this is because of the discretion with which *mbaraan* takes place: women who do *mbaraan* are secretive about the nature of their relationships. Space also plays a role: where *mbaraaneuses* are not linked to a particular milieu, *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night) are often found in bars and night clubs. The practice of *mbaraan* also reveals, however, how most women continue to rely on men to make ends meet (Foley and Dramé 2013).

If prostitution is associated with a particular milieu, and if women who are known to frequent this milieu risk stigmatisation as *caga*, *ñi génn guddi* nevertheless display craftiness to escape being labelled *caga* and the stigma that goes with this. The choice to speak about "those who go out" is one way in which women speak discreetly about their connections to nightlife. Maintaining a sense of elusiveness is key for women who refer to themselves and their friends as *ñi génn guddi* or *kóoba*. *Kóoba* is a code name for social outcasts, including *ñi génn guddi*, and it refers to a variety of dissident practices in nightlife, as well as to the knowledge that is required to navigate the pleasures and dangers of this life successfully. Elusiveness allows women to carve out space for their dissident lives without compromising their relationships with family and outsiders to the milieu.

Coura was 29 years old when I met her in Saint-Louis in the summer of 2021. I had met her during a bar visit to meet a sex worker association in Saint-Louis. I had gone to the bar with Aminata who, as a peer educator, organised such activities in different bars in the city. On evenings like these, she would encourage women whom she knew lacked a *carnet sanitaire* (F: health booklet), to come to the health clinic where she worked for a free HIV-test and free condoms. Coura and I had a brief chat on this evening in the bar,

and we exchanged numbers so that we could meet again in Dakar, where she would soon travel in order to “*lijjanti Tabaski*” (W: prepare for Tabaski [the Islamic feast of Sacrifice], earn money).<sup>54</sup> “*Adduna dafa metti*” (W: life is difficult) she said, and preparations for Tabaski, included buying expensive *getzner* fabric for outfits for herself and her family, a wig or new hair braids, as well as onions and potatoes for the feast meal.<sup>55</sup> “*Te suma xeesul, nit ñi dañuy wax: dafa am perte, moo tax mu ñuul*” (W: And if I’m not white [clear skin, achieved with whitening lotions], people will say: she lost something, that’s why she’s black). Indeed, when I met Coura a week later in Dakar, and I explained to her again the purpose of my research, mentioning that I was studying the lives of *travailleuses de sexe* (F: “sex workers”), she started by saying that she is not a “sex worker.” An hour into our conversation, I learned that Coura has a *carnet sanitaire*, which means that she is registered as a “prostitute” with the health authorities. Initially responding negatively to my question was a way of confronting me with the prejudices I might have about her life as a “sex worker.” Her response had puzzled me, after all, I had met her at an outreach activity of a sex worker organisation. It revealed, however, that a category like “sex worker” has limited explanatory power: it works primarily for legal and health authorities to “identify” people and to execute health projects. In her own self-understanding, *ñi génn guddi* was a more apt term to describe the propriety with which she navigated going out at night for commercial sex with finding other ways of earning money, and living her life as a respectable woman who lives with her mother most of the time.

The discourses around “sex work” in Senegal are informed by the legal regulation of commercial sexuality. Selling sex is legal, provided that so-called prostitutes register in a government clinic, go for regular medical screening, and attend education sessions (Foley 2017). It is illegal for anyone under the age of twenty-one to practice prostitution, and younger women, and anyone else who is unregistered, are considered *clandestines*, and they work illegally.<sup>56</sup> The result of registering as a “prostitute” includes access to testing for sexually transmitted diseases and the provision of condoms, but it also works as evidence that a woman is a “prostitute.” Registered “prostitutes” facilitate the state’s desire to control women’s sexuality, whereas *clandestines* threaten the efficacy of STI and HIV prevention and treatment programmes, thereby posing a threat to the health of the nation (ibid.). In fact, the regulation of prostitution functions as a mechanism for excluding women who do not conform to sexual norms, and it provides a framework for control over women’s sexuality (Bowen and Bungay 2016; Tamale 2011b). Moreover, the stigmatisation that registered “prostitutes” face inside the institutions

<sup>54</sup> Tabaski is the name used in Senegal for Eid al-Adha, the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice, which honours the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice one of his sons as an act of obedience to Allah. Before he could sacrifice his son, however, Allah offered him a lamb to sacrifice instead. Every year, Muslims commemorate this intervention by ritually sacrificing sheep.

<sup>55</sup> Popular, high-quality fabrics that people buy to make outfits particularly for festive occasions. They are produced in Austria and they are very popular in Senegal and other West African countries.

<sup>56</sup> Male “sex workers” are also excluded from registration as same-sex sexual conduct is illegal.



that provide medical care for them feeds into, and legitimises, the stigmatisation of “prostitutes” in society at large (Foley 2017; Fouquet 2007).

Women like Coura are wary of the surveillance that comes with registering, and they have devised ways to avoid such control. Using a *certificat de perte* (F: proof of loss) after reporting a lost identity card at the police, Coura could register at the health clinic under another name.<sup>57</sup> She obtained a new identity card after she lost the previous one, yet she has carefully kept her *certificat de perte*, so that she does not have to confirm her identity with her ID card. She attends a clinic outside of Dakar for the monthly medical check-ups that come with registration as a “prostitute,” to avoid running into too many people she might know from downtown Dakar. Her ways of navigating *clandestinité* and registration are another example of not coming into full view as a way to survive.

Beyond the health clinic, she goes by different names and she has multiple sim cards. Her family does not know the name that she goes by at night, which is again different from the one with which she is registered at the health clinic. Such practices to remain elusive reflect the multiple positions that women like Coura embody, at once dutiful daughters and so-called wicked women. She had moved to Dakar in 2012 and started going out at night as a way to support her mother financially. Her mother is a *voyante* (F: clairvoyant) and, according to Coura, used to be fairly successful. She had an important, wealthy client in France, but she got into financial trouble when she lost this person’s business. Although Coura does not know what happened to the woman and why she stopped consulting Coura’s mother, she suggested that another *voyante* must have done something to sabotage her work, out of jealousy. Determined to support her mother financially, Coura shared her earnings with her mother. Knowing very well the advantages and disadvantages of both registration and clandestinity, she navigates the possibilities and constraints that both afford her as she moves between work – commercial sex and petty commerce – and locations, between Dakar where she goes out at night and Saint-Louis where she lives with her mother. In all these different locations, she conceals different layers of her life and body to maintain an image of respectability (Meiu 2020).

“*Je n’aime pas les nigériens, j’aime les parisiens*” (F: I don’t like Nigerians, I like Parisians), said Coura as she turned down a man who had presented himself to her as an “*américain*,” someone who had been to the United States. I had joined her to a club in a residential neighbourhood in Dakar. He spoke to her in English as he proposed to take her out for a drink. Coura did not believe that he had been to the U.S., and she suggested that he was Nigerian.<sup>58</sup> She preferred people who had been to Paris, a city that she equated with class. “*Tu les connais, les tubaab yu ñuul?*” (F/W: Do you know them, the whites who are black?),

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Coura, 25 June 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Fieldnotes, 16 July 2021.

she asked me. Being born in Saint-Louis, she considered herself to be someone with class too, and therefore one of the names that she goes by in nightlife includes a reference to her hometown. “*Tu sais, les Saint-Louisiennes sont très civilisées, plus que les Dakaroises. Tu le vois, elles ont fait les bancs*” (F: You know, Saint-Louisiennes are very civilised, more so than Dakaroises. You’ll notice it, they have been to school). Coura’s reference to women from Saint-Louis as particularly civilised has historical roots. As the first capital of French West Africa and a creation of the French in 1658, Saint-Louis remains in the memory of Senegalese a place of nobility, economic grandeur, and cosmopolitanism (Kane Lo 2014). Having turned down the *américain* whom she thought was a *nigérian*, she turned to me and said that she would soon head to Almadies, one of the chic neighbourhoods in Dakar that is known for its high-end bars and clubs. “*Je ne fréquente pas les endroits comme [nom du bar] où ils te paient 5,000 FCFA, et où tu dois travailler toute la nuit pour avoir suffisamment d’argent*” (F: I don’t go out to places like [name of bar] where they pay you 5,000 FCFA (8 euros), and where you will have to work the entire night to earn enough money). She hissed and shook her head as she continued, “*Quand je vais à [nom du bar] aux Almadies, je rencontre des hommes qui t’emmènent au Radisson. Ils t’emmènent à des vies que tu n’as jamais connu*” (F: When I go to [name of bar] in Almadies, I find men who will take me to the Radisson hotel. They take you to lives you never knew).

Fouquet (2007) refers to clandestine “sex workers” adoption of ideas, habits, and know-how from other parts of the worlds – Coura’s reference to “lives you never knew” – as “strategies of extraversion.” Fouquet draws upon Bayart’s (1999) conceptualisation of “strategies of extraversion” as the ways in which postcolonial African political elites took advantage of their dependency on the West, to their own benefit. They adopted, for example, Western norms of democracy in ways that consolidated their own power. Strategies of extraversion could include, in addition to the political domain, the economic or cultural domain – the main idea being that “sovereignty in Africa is exercised through the creation and management of dependence” (ibid., 228). Women’s strategies of extraversion, Fouquet argues, show how worldly knowledge, ideas, and practices constitute a form of self-making for women. Such strategies concern the adoption of elements from other cultures to obtain local objectives in a way that creatively adjusts and transfers the meanings of such practices (Fouquet 2007, 104; see Bayart 1996). Emphasising her appearance and her work as civilised and chic, Coura shaped her “desire for elsewhere” (Fouquet 2007) through her presence in nightlife. Going out at night allows women like Coura to construct a different life story – one with financial autonomy – to escape from some forms of social control, and to gain access to the Western world by learning about other cultures from *tubaab* (W: white, European/Western person) and *tubaab yu ñuul* (W: whites who are black, i.e. Senegalese who have been to Europe) boyfriends and clients.

For Coura, this was much more attractive than the lives of many married women around her. Comparing her life to that of the maid who lives with her and her mother, after Coura learned how her husband treated her, Coura considered her life as an unmarried woman who “goes out at night” to be preferable:

*Il ne lui donne jamais 1.000 F. Mais elle aime son mari tellement... moi je comprends pas. C'est ça que je dis quand je dis que les hommes vont te tuer... ils font tout avec toi. Ils couchent avec toi, ils t'ençointent, mais ils ne partagent jamais une centime. Ça c'est pas une vie dé! Tsssh. Je ne l'accepte pas. (F: He never gives her 1,000 F CFA. But she loves her husband so much... I don't understand. That's what I mean when I say that men will kill you... they do everything with you. They sleep with you, they impregnate you, but they never share a cent. That's not a life! Tsssh. I don't accept that).<sup>59</sup>*

Navigating stigma is also about finding ways to explain one's behaviour as the better option. Comparing the affordances of “going out at night” with the hardships of marriage helped Coura to legitimise her choices as driven by good intentions. Women may explain their reasons for “going out at night” as being borne out of economic distress rather than out of a quest for pleasure, and their unmarried status as a result of the absence of a suitable husband or the wish to continue with studies and pursue a professional career.<sup>60</sup> Coura explained her current choice for “going out” instead of getting married as a more preferable option in view of the suffering that many women endure in their marriage. While Coura also relies on men for money, she experiences more autonomy in acquiring and subsequently spending this money. “Going out at night” can give women this autonomy to craft their own trajectories, to discover other worlds through their encounters with others in nightlife. Clandestinity, Fouquet (2007, 108) argues,

*Est une stratégie qui permet de synthétiser des rôles parfois opposés ou très distants [...] de manipuler son image pour tirer profit des occasions: autant de 'savoir-faire,' indexés à des 'savoir être,' qui ouvrent certains possibles, autorisent l'accès à certains gains matériels et symboliques (F: Is a strategy that makes it possible to synthesise roles that are sometimes opposed or very distant [...] to manipulate one's image in order to take advantage of opportunities: so much 'know-how,' indexed to 'savoir-être,' which opens up certain possibilities, authorising access to certain material and symbolic gains).*

<sup>59</sup> Conversation with Coura, 25 June 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Since the 1990s, many Senegalese men have migrated abroad in search for work. Furthermore, high unemployment levels in Senegal have made it increasingly difficult for people to get married. To remain unmarried until well in your thirties is thus no longer necessarily deemed wicked (see Buggenhagen 2012, 97).

*Ñi génn guddi*, in other words, create a moral economy of resourcefulness and not-knowing that characterises urban life for women in Senegal. For Fanta too, who was thirty-nine years old when I met her in 2022, marriage appeared tougher than her previous life as a *ku génn* (W: someone who goes out). When I met her at a social event arranged by a sex worker organisation, she said that she had stopped “going out” four years earlier when she got married. After two decades of going out as an unmarried woman, she got married in 2018 when her then boyfriend, previously her client, had, quite suddenly, visited Fanta’s family to ask for her hand. Fanta had received a phone call from her mother who asked her to come home immediately. Fanta briefly discussed the matter with women from the sex worker association that she was in a workshop with at that moment. The chair of the association encouraged her to go home and accept the marriage, because being a married woman was considered a better option than being a *ku génn*. Reflecting on what has changed over the last four years since her marriage to Moussa, Fanta sighed,

*Depuis quatre ans, damay souffrir. Génn moo gën a néex séy. Ci milieu dama fa gis bânneex. Ci milieu danga fay gis lu néex te danga fay gis lu bon. Lépp am na fa. Dëgg la, man dama fa gis bânneex. Ndaxte gis naa fa ay góor yu fonk jigéen. Dañu lay wax ay wax yu néex, dañu xam amour. Dañu gën a xam amour sama jëkkër. Bi ñu séye ba léegi gisuma amour ci moom* (W/F: For four years, I have been suffering. Going out is better than marriage. In that environment [of going out at night], I experienced joy. You see good things and bad things. It’s all there. It’s true that I’ve seen lots of good things, I’ve met men there with respect for women. They talk to you in a nice way, they know love. They know love better than my husband. Ever since I married him, I haven’t seen love).<sup>61</sup>

When asking her what this joy was or meant to her, she said: “*Danga am xalis, danga teeral sa bopp*” (W: You have money, you look after yourself). The satisfaction that she experienced from “going out” was enhanced by the ability to sustain herself with the money that she earned. With the Wolof expression “*teeral sa bopp*,” which resembles the English expression to stand on one’s own two feet, Fanta conveyed the autonomy that she had when she was able to look after herself and her children.

Fanta had started going out at night at a very young age as she regularly accompanied her grandmother into town to beg. She recounted how she was about thirteen or fourteen years old when she first received a significant sum from an older man, who had invited her to join him at the bar across the street. She learned that the women who hung around the area were mostly waiting to be solicited for sex, and after that first encounter she joined them. The fact that she had accompanied her grandmother to beg in Dakar’s city

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Fanta, 21 March 2022.

centre, indicates the poor background that she is from. “*Suma jangóon duma génn*” (W: If I had been to school, I would not go out), she said as she complained that she had not been able to secure a partly paid position at the sex worker association that she was a member of. Unable to secure a stable, if only partial, income through the sex worker association, Fanta sought other ways to support herself and her three young children.

Having children complicates how women maintain *sutura* with regards to their commercial sex activities, because others may know that these children were born out of wedlock. Nevertheless, women craft ways to avoid family members knowing that they still “go out at night” for survival, for example by maintaining physical distance from their families, which allows women to tell a different story about how they earn an income. Because having young children may interfere with working at night, women may leave their children with their parents, and send home money on a monthly basis, to facilitate the children’s care (Venables 2007). Fanta had also asked her mother to care for her two sons when they were young, when Fanta still “went out at night.” This way, a woman’s children are shielded from the work that their mother does, and she can avoid gossip in the neighbourhood about being a “bad” mother who exposes her children to supposedly immoral practices.

When her mother’s health deteriorated to the point that she could no longer look after the children and ensure that they would go to school, Fanta took her children home with her. By then she had married Moussa and had a daughter with him. To be able to pay for her sons’ school fees – both had absent fathers, with one living abroad and the other one being in prison the last time she had heard – she found a job as a cleaner. Moussa, her husband, and the father of her four year-old daughter did not contribute structurally to Fanta’s expenses or those of her children. She worked for the cleaning company in the early mornings, so that she could be home with her children for lunch, but this job does not pay much, and she has lost the financial independence that she had prior to her marriage. Pointing at the vinyl flooring in her room, she said: “*Xoolal bi mu xottiku. Bu bees bi 6,000 FCFA kese la jar, waaye bëggul ko jënd. Est-ce que c’est normal? [...] Jafe na lire intentions góoru Sénégal. Aka mën nañu fénn!*” (W/F: Look at how it’s torn. A new one only costs 6,000 FCFA (about nine euros) but he won’t buy it. Is that normal? [...] It’s hard to read Senegalese men’s intentions. Oh how they are good at lying!).<sup>62</sup> The financial autonomy of being able to provide for one’s needs, which, in addition to having a clean, proper room, includes being able to offer new outfits to one’s family for religious holidays like Tabaski (Eid al-Adha) and Korité (Eid al-Fitr), had made Fanta proud, and had gained her respect from her family for whom she was able to provide. She lost this ability upon marriage, when she was asked to stop going out and stay at home to look after the children.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Fanta, 25 March 2022.

The sense of autonomy that going out affords women does not mean that they do not depend on others. Under conditions of economic precarity, people need networks to make ends meet. Moreover, with the particular dangers that are associated with the milieu of going out, which can include violent clients, the risk of contracting STIs, and the influence of alcohol and drugs, sharing tips and tricks on how to navigate such dangers is essential. Support networks come in the form of sex worker organisations, of which Fanta was also a part, but there are also more informal and direct ways of support that women sustain together. Fanta told me,

*Bëgguma ànd ak samay morom. Caga, góor-jigéen ak gouines, ñoom ñépp benn lañu, dañu vulgaire. Say morom duñu lay jox cér. Damay ànd ak samay dóom wala samay rakk wala samay yaay* (W: I don't want to hang out with my peers. "Prostitutes," *gays* and *lesbiennes*, they're all the same, they're vulgar. Peers don't give you respect. I hang out with my children, my younger siblings or my mothers).

One of the children she referred to is Ngoné, whom she was introduced to by a friend. When they met, Ngoné had recently moved to Dakar in search of work, and her dream was to open a boutique to sell clothes. She had started going out at night in order to earn the money needed to set up such a business. Her intention was to do this temporarily to save enough money. As soon as she opened her business, "*do amaat jot puur góor*" (W: you won't have time for men anymore). She looked forward to that moment, because "*góor dañu lay sonnal*" (W: men, they fatigue you).<sup>63</sup> Ngoné had come to see Fanta today because she wanted to do an HIV-test. She is not registered as a "prostitute," so she does not go for the regular medical check-ups that registered "prostitutes" do. Knowing that Fanta has good access to a health clinic via the sex worker organisation that she is a member of, Ngoné had come to ask Fanta to take her there. Fanta had hosted Ngoné for a couple of months earlier, when the two had met in a bar, and Ngoné had told her that she had left her room after the neighbourhood had started insulting her and calling her *caga*. Fanta explained that this was "*ndax li mu sol. Stylam dafa vulgaire. Léegi tan na sax*" (W: Because of what she wears. Her style is vulgar. It has improved now).

Fanta provides Ngoné with advice on how to avoid being stigmatised, and she has encouraged Ngoné to change her way of dressing, at least during the day. Keeping up a respectful appearance is important to be able to maintain a sense of not-knowing about one's whereabouts. In the months that Ngoné stayed with Fanta, the two went out together, and Fanta helped Ngoné find her way in Dakar's nightlife. "*Milieu bi dafa graw, danga fa gis ay nit yu bon. Bëgguma sama doom di ko dund*" (W: The environment is bad, you see bad people there. I don't want my children to go through this.) By advising Ngoné about places, people, and practices to avoid, she hoped to spare her of some of

<sup>63</sup> Conversation with Ngoné, 21 March 2022.

the bad things that can happen in this milieu. “*Dafa niite*” (W: She is lucid), Ngoné said about Fanta’s advice. “*Dama téel a am fit, moo tax*” (W: I was courageous early on, that’s why), Fanta added in agreement. Her long-standing experience of going out at night to various places in Dakar, including in the more dangerous zones on the outskirts of Dakar, where international truck drivers were stationed, taught her the necessary courage to survive in this environment.

When Fanta speaks about her children, she signals a relationship to often younger, less experienced *ñi génn guddi* whom she familiarises with the milieu and provides guidance and advice. While acknowledging the difficulties that she faces as a *ku génn* in Dakar, the formation of close bonds with other women who go out at night has allowed Fanta to learn and transmit ways to survive in a challenging context, and create a life that may be more liveable than married life as she is currently experiencing it. For women like Coura and Fanta, elusiveness has been a key tactic for playing with people’s perceptions as a way to avoid stigma. The multiple identities that Coura takes on allow her to navigate and embody different positionalities and to draw on what these afford her. Fanta’s mothering relationship to younger women in the nightlife milieu indicates how resourcefulness and not-knowing are practices that are learned and transmitted through and to others. An analysis of these bonds are at the heart of the next chapter, in which I elaborate how women cultivate kinship bonds that enable them to create and transmit such knowledge and know-how.

Where a woman like Coura maintains elusiveness through a refusal to identify (register) as a “prostitute,” going by multiple names, and navigating her way in nightlife by seeking to go out to “classy” places, other women made use of the possibilities that religion affords women to adopt different, perhaps masculine, ways of dress. Religious allegiance and appearance also play a role in women’s attempts to maintain a sense of elusiveness and, paradoxically, religion creates space for dissident practices.

## Religious ambiguities

Fama, a 27 year-old *lesbienne* who rented a room with her girlfriend in Dakar, told me how she had adjusted her sales ware when the *khalifa* (religious authority) of the city of Touba had prohibited *tiaya*, harem pants worn by the religious Baay Faal community, for women. Fama sold clothing to her network of *jump* (masculine-presenting women) friends, and the outfits that she sold for religious occasions such as the Magal – the annual pilgrimage of Murids to the city of Touba to commemorate the exile of the founder of the brotherhood, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba – were usually outfits that the religious Baay Faal community wore. The wearing of trousers was already prohibited for women in Touba, but *tiaya*, which are part of the *njaxas* (patchwork) outfit of Baay Faal, had

always been an accepted for women Baay Faal.<sup>64</sup> The *khalifa's* prohibition of *tiaya* for women coincided with an increase in anti-queer debates in 2021, after a large anti-queer demonstration had been organised in May 2021, and a proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ identities was being prepared. Fama, who, like many of her *jump* friends, felt comfortable in Baay Faal outfits precisely because they were not so feminine, quickly adjusted her stock for the Magal of 2021. Instead of *tiaya*, she now sold wide *boubou* dresses, still in Baay Faal style. Adopting a Baay Faal identity had provided space for Fama and her friends to present in a masculine fashion, even if she has had to adjust her style in response to growing anti-queer sentiments. Playing with people's perceptions and maintaining a sense of elusiveness around one's identities is crucial when public debates increasingly revolve around identifying sexually dissident behaviour.

Groups like the Baay Faal, and the Yàlla-Yàlla to which Ndella and Arame belonged, afford women some leeway from normative femininity. Baay Faal are, like Yàlla-Yàlla, a sub-group within the Murid brotherhood, and they are often recognisable by their patchwork clothing and dreadlocks. Their plain physical appearance is part of the embodiment of Baay Faal identity, which is further built through their manual labour for their *khalifa*, and a rejection of worldly luxury. Although the Murid brotherhood has shown conservatism with regards to gender and sexual norms, demonstrated by the *khalifa's* support for the anti-queer demonstrations and the proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ sexualities, the brotherhood paradoxically also accommodates marginal (gender) identities. Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla perspectives on spirituality have set them apart from dominant norms of religious piety and gender expressions. Drawing on a grammar of suffering as a means to come closer to God and to grow spiritually, Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla embody asceticism through modest and simple appearances, including patchwork clothing and dreadlocks (Audrain 2004; D. Ndiaye 2020). Both groups impose less religious constraints on people, not restricting the consumption of weed and alcohol for example, whereby they accommodate behaviour that is otherwise frowned upon in society (Havard 2001). For *lesbiennes*, adopting a Baay Faal or Yàlla-Yàlla identity allows them to tacitly transgress gender norms, embodying a certain masculinity that is tolerated by society. Baay Faal and Yàlla-Yàlla are somewhat socially marginalised, but their followers nevertheless find comfort in their belonging to these religious groups (D. Ndiaye 2020), as it allows many youth to construct their own ethical, critical, religious subjectivities (Audrain 2004).

Like the vast majority of the Senegalese population, all of my interlocutors were Muslim, with different degrees of practice. Most of them did not, however, perceive their Muslim faith to be irreconcilable with having same-sex lovers. Some of my interlocutors did consider same-sex practices to be a sin, but they relativised it by saying that no one

<sup>64</sup> Women Baay Faal are sometimes called Yaay Faal.



is perfect and that everyone is somehow sinning. More often, however, they would say that God had made them this way, and that he would not have made them as such if he did not accept *lesbiennes*. Whether they found they were in sin or not, many of my interlocutors shared the opinion that Astou shared when she said to me, “*C’est comme un virus qui entre dans ton sang. Quand tu as commencé, c’est difficile d’arrêter*” (F: It’s like a virus that enters your blood, once you’ve started, it is difficult to stop).<sup>65</sup> Astou was in her early thirties when I met her in 2020. Her particular, and changing, relation to religion sheds light on what religious faith can bring women, both spiritually as well in terms of finding a space for themselves in Senegal as masculine-presenting women. Exploring Astou’s trajectory with the Yàlla-Yàlla gives insight into how women search for meaning-making and legitimation in their lives. At the same time, religious convictions may force people to show their true colours, and as women become more embedded in a religious community – for example through membership of a *dahira*, predominantly urban prayer circles of Murids that function both as religious gatherings and important networks of socialisation among Murid followers (Babou 2002) – these communities and their leaders (*marabouts*) may, at a certain moment, ask women to renounce dissident practices and to show religious piety.

Astou has worked as a primary school teacher in a rural area in northern Senegal since 2018. She comes from a modest family background, and because her father is blind and has been an active member of an association for blind people, Astou benefited from a scholarship to attend school. Very committed to learning, she was top of the class in both French and Arabic. When narrating her life until now, she remarked that she has always had two sides: first, she went to a Franco-Arabic school, where she received both a religious and secular-French education. She was good at, and enjoyed, both French and Arabic. At primary school, she recalled, she was very pious, prayed a lot, was veiled, and she would refuse to join in celebrating Christian religious feasts such as Christmas.<sup>66</sup> When she reached middle school, she changed to a French school. At this school, she befriended a group of girls who, Astou recalled, took pleasure in talking about the boys they fancied and who fancied them. Instead of covering her body with long dresses and a veil, Astou started dressing in a very feminine way, in tight-fitting tops, skinny jeans, and short skirts. She recounted how she experienced “*un dé clic*” (F: a click), however, when she was about sixteen years old. “*Les seuls moments où je me sentais moi-même, c’était pendant les cours d’éducation physique. Je me sapais tellement en tenue de sport, et qui dit tenue de sport, dit tenue d’homme*” (F: The only moments when I really felt myself, was during physical education classes. I dressed so well in sports outfits, and whoever says sports outfit, says men’s outfit). Soon, the sports outfits that she wore for physical education classes at school

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Astou, 26 February 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Many Senegalese are proud to say that Muslims invite Christian friends and neighbours to their celebrations such as Tabaski and Korité, and, vice versa, Christians will invite their Muslim neighbours and friends to Christian celebrations such as Christmas and Easter.

became her daily outfits. When a fire had destroyed all her clothes, “*C’est là que je me suis dit que.. ça c’est un signe, c’est un signe pour m’habiller enfin comme je veux*” (F: That’s when I told myself that... that is a sign, it’s a sign to finally dress as I want). At some point,

*Tout le monde savait que j’étais lesbienne. Je le montrais vraiment, je draguais ouvertement les filles dans la rue. Je me considérais comme un homme, donc je croyais avoir le droit de le faire. C’est ainsi que les gens ont su que j’étais lesbienne. Je n’ai même pas pensé aux conséquences* (F: Everybody knew that I was a lesbienne. I really showed it, I openly flirted with girls on the streets. I considered myself a man, so I thought I had the right to do so. This is how people knew I was a lesbienne. I did not even think about the consequences).

Feeling emboldened by her newfound style, she further challenged gender norms by going out whenever and wherever she wanted. She said, “*Je ne pouvais pas rester tranquille deux jours sans faire des bêtises, non. Je fugeais, j’allais chez des copines tu vois. C’était le bordel. Si j’étais pas assez intelligente...*” (F: Not two days would go by without me doing something stupid. I fled, away from home. I stayed with girlfriends. It was a mess. If I had not been smart enough...). When I asked her what “stupid” things she did, she responded:

*Tu sais, dans notre mentalité, dans notre culture, tu ne peux pas dire à un homme: tu dois dormir à telle heure, tu dois être à la maison à telle heure. Un homme c’est un homme, tu le laisses faire ce qu’il veut. Et moi, c’est ça que je voulais en fait. Pouvoir sortir, aller, rentrer à l’heure où je voulais rentrer. Donc, c’était pas méchant. Moi, au moins, c’était pas la cigarette, c’était pas l’alcool et tout. Non, c’était pas ça. C’était juste un désir de free. Un désir de liberté que je voulais exercer aussi. Un désir d’homme qui peut à tout moment imposer son point de vue à tout le monde. En fait c’était plus ça. Puis, voilà, je fuguais, je partais... On m’appelait au téléphone, je répondais pas. Voilà, donc ma mère m’a expulsé de la maison à plusieurs reprises. Et je dormais dans la rue.* (F: You know, in our mentality, in our culture, you cannot tell a man: you have to sleep at a certain time, you have to be home at a certain time. Men are men, we let them do whatever they want. And I, I wanted that too. I wanted to be able to go out, and come home whenever I wanted. It was not something bad, I was not smoking or drinking. It was just a desire for freedom. I wanted to have this freedom of a man, who can impose his perspective on the world at any moment. So, well, I fled. I left the house, and when people called me, I did not respond. My mother kicked me out of the house several times. And I slept on the streets).

When I first met Astou in the autumn of 2020, she no longer presented in a very masculine fashion. I met her together with her girlfriend Rokhaya at Nafissatou’s house. Ndella and Arame, their good friends, were also there. I wanted to know what had made her change her appearance, and when.

*Mon changement est venu de deux choses: Rokhaya bien entendu. Mais la première chose, c'était le côté spirituel. Dans ce côté spirituel, j'ai toujours su... au fond de moi... parce que je suis musulmane... j'ai toujours su au fond de moi que Dieu, on doit le voir. On le voit, mais comment on le voit? Il faut aller chez un marabout qui l'a vu et qui peut t'y amener. C'est pas tout le monde qui peut t'amener là-bas, parce qu'il y a beaucoup de marabouts ici. Il doit avoir appris les enseignements de Cheikh Moussa Cissé. C'est ça qu'on appelle les Yàlla-Yàlla. Arame y était rentrée. Mais moi, c'était quelque chose que je cherchais, parce que au fond de moi, j'ai toujours su que je vais chercher... et en ce moment, elle avait un lien avec eux, et je lui ai dit: amène moi. On y est allée. J'ai pris mon chapelet et j'y suis allée avec elle. (F: My change came from two things. Rokhaya, of course, but before that, there was the spiritual side. From my spiritual side, I've always known... deep down... because I'm a Muslim... that God, we have to see Him. We see Him, but how? You will have to go to a marabout who has seen Him, and who can take you there. Not everyone can take you there, there are a lot of marabouts here. He has to have been taught the wisdom of Cheikh Moussa Cissé. This wisdom is what we call the Yàlla-Yàlla. Arame had entered there. But me, it was something I was looking for, because deep down, I have always known that I will search... and at this moment, she had a link with them, and I told her: take me there. We went there. I took up my rosary and went with her).<sup>67</sup>*

Astou was introduced to the Yàlla-Yàlla by Arame in 2010, and she was invited to join Arame's *dahira*, a religious association that brings together all disciples of a *marabout*. She talked about this introduction:

*Ma mère m'avait encore expulsé de la maison à cause des Yàlla-Yàlla. Parce qu'elle se disait que, en plus d'être lesbienne, elle veut m'achever. Elle veut être Yàlla-Yàlla. C'est quelque chose qui est mal-vu. Parce que dans notre société, si tu dis que tu as vu Dieu, ils te prennent pour un fou. Ils disent même que c'est une secte (F: My mother kicked me out of the house again because of the Yàlla-Yàlla. She said that, in addition to being a lesbienne, she wants to kill me by being Yàlla-Yàlla. It is frowned upon. If in our society you say that you have seen God, they take you for a mad person. They even call it a sect).<sup>68</sup>*

Being kicked out of the house by her mother brought a certain freedom for Astou to follow her own trajectory. She joined Arame at the *dahira*, in search of a more spiritual connection to God. When the *marabout* in the *dahira* asked her what she was seeking, she also responded that she wanted to be a “normal woman” with “normal feelings.” She alluded, indirectly, to her same-sex desires, to which the *marabout* had also responded obliquely.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Astou, 2 February 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Astou, 2 February 2021.

He responded that if she really wanted it, she would have it. “*C’est là que je me suis dit que tout dépend de moi*” (F: It was then that I realised that it all depended on me). Despite her great interest in the Yàlla-Yàlla, however, she soon left the *dahira*, “*à cause des filles*” (F: because of girls). Recounting her time in the *dahira*, she told me:

*Je m’étais retirée dans un village. J’étais focus sur lui, il n’y avait plus de filles dans ma vie. J’avais même plus de portable. J’étais focus sur lui. Ça durait comme ça. Mais il y avait cette tentation des filles là... toujours... et puis, tu sais, Dieu il nous met des obstacles sur la route, toujours des obstacles pour nous tester, pour tester notre amour envers lui. Il faut être forte, il faut pas céder à la tentation. Mais moi j’y ai cédé. J’ai mangé la pomme d’Eve et d’Adam. Je l’ai mangé... même pas croqué, je l’ai avalé* (F: I had retreated to the village. I was focused on him, there were no more girls in my life. I didn’t even have a mobile phone any more. I was focused on him. For a while, it went on like that. But there was that temptation of girls there... always... and then, you know, God puts obstacles in our way, always obstacles to test us, to test our love for Him. You have to be strong to resist the temptation. I was not, I ate the apple of Adam and Eve. I ate it... I didn’t even bite into it, I swallowed it entirely).

Astou could not choose for devotion and piety entirely if this meant that she had to sacrifice her same-sex relationships. She left the *dahira*, and after having finished high school, went on to study Arabic at the University in Dakar. After she left the *dahira*, she also went back to her earlier masculine style of dress. At university she met her current girlfriend, Rokhaya, in 2015. Rokhaya was a tutor on the course that Astou was taking, and she supervised the exams that Astou’s class took. “*Durant tout l’examen je l’ai observé. Je voulais mieux la connaître, donc devant tout le monde je lui ai demandé: mariée ou célibataire? Et je lui ai donné mon numéro. Mes anciennes habitudes de la drague ne m’avaient pas quitté!*” (F: During the entire exam, I observed her. I wanted to get to know her, so in front of the entire class, I asked her: married or single? And then I gave her my number. My old habits of flirting had not left me!). They soon started seeing each other regularly. Early on in their relationship, Astou said to Rokhaya that she wanted this to be sustainable, and that she knew that she had to change her style of dress for that, to avoid people from suspecting they were in a romantic relationship. One day as the two got dressed, Astou decided to try on Rokhaya’s clothes.

*Et c’est en portant ses habits, et en mettant son voile que je me suis dit: voilà, c’est ça que je veux. Il me fallait ça, parce que c’est pas seulement le fait de s’habiller comme une femme. C’est en mettant son voile et ses habits que je me suis rendue compte que je me sentais à l’aise en étant voilée. C’était pas pour la religion, c’était pas pour le fun, c’était pas pour le buzz. Parce que actuellement, parce que c’est jolie, parce que c’est à la mode.*

*Pour moi c'était rien de ça. J'ai pris le voile, parce que je me sentais à l'aise, parce que ça cachais plus ma masculinité qu'autre chose* (F: And it's when I wore her clothes, and her veil, that I realised that this was what I wanted. That is what I needed, because it is not just a question of dressing like a woman. When I wore her veil and her clothes, I felt at ease being veiled. It wasn't for religion, it wasn't for the fun of it, it wasn't for the buzz. Because you know, the veil today is pretty fashionable. It was nothing of that all for me. I felt at ease because this hides my masculinity the most).

She felt at ease with this type of dress, and she also realised how it changed the way others looked at her. Expressing religious piety afforded her the possibility to play with her elusive identities. Her choice to veil coincided with her move into working life, for which a respectable outfit was required anyway. Because both Rokhaya and Astou are now veiled, people who see the two together, have never questioned the nature of their relationship, at least not openly. Astou's change of allegiance from the Yàlla-Yàlla, with their relatively relaxed attitude towards ways of dress, to her wearing the veil, shows how religiosity is a dynamic process in which women balance religious convictions with personal desires, family expectations, all the while navigating how they appear to others. Six years into their relationship, they have maintained the image of being best friends. In addition to their style of dress, Rokhaya's married status furthermore removes any suspicion that people might have of their relationship. And because both have a stable, relatively well-paying job, they are able to go out of town occasionally to enjoy their relationship. Financial independence must not be underestimated as a factor that allows women's relationships to thrive. Astou's evolving appearances were informed by changing contexts and life-stages, but also by the need to remain elusive and maintain a sense of ambiguity about her relationships. The next section demonstrates how, in addition to ambiguity and elusiveness, secrecy may be a necessary practice to create space for women's dissident practices.

## Secrecy at a same-sex wedding

In the summer of 2020, I attended the wedding of Yacine and Mariama, two women of, respectively, twenty-eight and twenty-seven at the time.<sup>69</sup> In a context of rising anti-queer sentiments, in which mediatised “scandals” and subsequent witch hunts, about the supposed threat of “homosexuality,” have often revolved around the organisation of supposed gay marriages, it is remarkable that Yacine and Mariama decided to organise a wedding. This context makes secrecy about such an event extra important. Secrecy

<sup>69</sup> Given the legal restrictions on same-sex conduct, this wedding was not legally recognised. Yacine and Mariama, as well as the guests who were present, referred to it as their wedding, however, to signal the significance of the event for their relationship.

supposes that those from whom information is withheld have a desire to know (Kirsch 2015). This makes secrecy a social practice that creates boundaries between insiders (those who know) and outsiders (those who don't know), constituting social inclusion and exclusion (ibid.). The sociality of secrecy also means that a group identity can be produced as a result of the sharing of a secret (Johnson in Kirsch 2015). The wedding that Yacine and Mariama organised with the help of Nafissatou, and in the presence of other *gays* and *lesbiennes*, contributed to the creation of a “communit[y] of secrecy” (Hardon and Posel 2012, S4) which, in addition to masking dissident practices, binds people together (Pierce 2007). While keeping silent about the event to others was very important to avoid ending up with a mediated “scandal,” the organisation of such an event was also a way to create a sense of community and belonging, which is a productive side to the necessity to conceal same-sex practices. The way the wedding proceeded, described in the vignette below, reveals a number of things about *lesbienne* and *gay* networks in today's Senegal, and the place of secrecy therein.

*When Yacine and I arrived at Nafissatou's place around 9 pm, the first guests have arrived. I know some of them, they regularly stop by the house. Nafissatou invited these men on purpose, in an attempt to draw less attention to the party than we would with a group of only women. Outside, we passed three guards, whom Nafissatou had hired to ensure the safety of the party. The atmosphere inside is tense and I overhear a discussion between one of the men and Nafissatou. The man does not trust the caterer of the party, who is Mariama's aunt. No one knows her, she is not a member of lesbienne and gay networks. This is rare, and people are usually very careful to invite only people whom they know, in an attempt to avoid the news from spreading outside their circles. Nafissatou tries to calm him by saying that Mariama's aunt has experience with organising private parties for big men, which means that she is used to seeing all sorts of relationships and sexual behaviour that she has to keep quiet about. I am not sure if he is convinced, but we must continue the final preparations. There is still a lot to do, and the stress of it all means I am not feeling very festive. The past days have been a hassle to get this wedding organised. Yacine and Mariama had left a lot of work until the last minute and yesterday afternoon, we were all surprised when the hotel that they had booked for their wedding party, suddenly cancelled their reservation. A quick discussion about the possible alternatives led to the conclusion that the wedding could be held at Nafissatou's house. A number of elements have to be skipped, out of fear of drawing attention to the party. The surprise act by a famous Senegalese artist is cancelled, and the group of *ngoyane*<sup>70</sup> with their *calebasse* instruments are all, except for one, sent home with some money.*

*Nafissatou opens the wedding ceremony with a word of welcome and a household notice: all phones have to be handed in. 'No photos or videos shall be taken, except for discreet photos*

<sup>70</sup> Traditional bards from the Seereer ethnic group.

which will be taken by Loes. We don't want Mame Mactar Gueye<sup>71</sup> to join our party here!' This makes everyone laugh, and Nafissatou passes around a reed basket for people to put their phones in, which she safely stores in her room. It is past midnight when the ngoyane starts to sing. As she praises Yacine and Mariama, and blesses their marriage, the two stand up to give her money. A lot of small bills are ostentatiously thrown to the ngoyane, who moves on to praise some of the other guests, who, in turn, also have to stand up to give her money. Then one of the guests joins in the praising, and he, a true performer, stands on a chair to loudly sing for the brides. Another guest, who had been in the kitchen to clean some of the food stuff, peeks his head around the corner and anxiously commands the performer 'woyal ci suuf!' (W: sing softly!). Another man joins in the singing, and asks me to take his photo. 'I've been on all the social media platforms already, I don't care if my photo goes around again!'

When the praise-singing is over, we take a break to eat and drink, before moving on to the ceremonial part of the evening. Yacine and Mariama take a seat on the couch, their golden wedding rings displayed in front of them on the coffee table, on a white cushion in the shape of a heart that Yacine and I had bought a couple of weeks earlier in Paris. The ceremony is brief and simple, with no master of ceremony to speech, and no vows expressed between the brides. [Name] and I, the witnesses of respectively Mariama and Yacine, hand over the rings, which they slide over each other's ring finger. When they have done so, the crowd starts yelling 'Kiss each other!' We all yell and applaud as they do. When Yacine and Mariama sit back down on the couch, they radiate joy, as they watch us all continue our cheerful banter. After they cut the three-tier wedding cake, Nafissatou and I take this moment to hand them our gift. When they have unpacked their gift, a big painting by an artist friend of mine, the two speak a few words to thank Nafissatou for making this wedding possible, and to thank me for all the practical assistance to organise this evening, already when I was in Paris with Yacine, and here in Dakar with both of them. They are joined by one of the men, who wants to thank Nafissatou. 'Ken du moom!' (W: there is no one like her!), he says. 'You can have problems with your father, your mother, your entire family... but Nafissatou is always there. She has always been there for us. As a community, we have gone through a lot of problems, and Nafissatou has always been there for us.'<sup>72</sup> It is a beautiful way to end this evening.

<sup>71</sup> Mame Mactar Gueye is the vice-president of the NGO Jamra, a faith-based civil society organisation that is very active in debates about (sexual) morality, and that has been one of the loud voices in anti-queer debates.

<sup>72</sup> My interlocutors often referred to their same-sex relations and friendships as community ('la communauté' in French). I mostly employ the term network for their relations, because community connotes a sense of harmony and shared (political) interests, which does not fit the context of lesbienne and gay networks in Senegal. When quoting my interlocutors, however, the term community can appear.





The wedding ceremony of Yacine and Mariama in 2020. Photo: Loes Oudenhuisen.

Nafissatou's joke during the wedding that Mame Mactar Gueye would arrive at their doorstep if any details about the wedding leaked, as well as the warning to sing softly, are indicative of the caution with which the wedding proceeded. Despite the utmost discretion with which this wedding had to be organised and the extra safety measures that had to be taken once the location was moved from a seaside hotel to Nafissatou's house, a festive evening was organised for and by a circle of *gay* and *lesbienne* friends. When I reflected back with Mariama on her marriage to Yacine, she said the following about their choice to get married:

*L'idée générale c'était de pouvoir montrer notre amour. De pouvoir sceller ce lien-là devant des personnes qui nous considèrent, qui ne nous jugent pas. Et qui nous acceptent telles que nous sommes. [...] Je peux dire que la communauté nous a aidé à réaliser nos rêves. Nos projets de mariage, nos projets de vie commune et tout cela. [...] Je dirai pas comme une belle-famille, mais comme une famille. Des amis. Des personnes avec qui tu as des liens. Des personnes que tu considères, des personnes qui sont importantes. Qui ont gagné une place importante en fait dans ta vie. Et je me dis que, la communauté a joué ce rôle, avec notre mariage, durant l'organisation. Je me suis sentie parmi la communauté depuis* (F: The general idea was to be able to show our love. To be able to seal this connection in front of people who respect us, who do not judge us. And who accept us for who we are. [...] I can say that the community has helped us to realise our dreams. Our marriage project, our projects of communal living. [...] For me, I would not say they are like in-laws, but like a family. Friends. People



with whom you have a connection. People you consider, and who are important for you. For me, the community has played this role, before, during, and after the organisation of our wedding. And I have felt part of this community since.)<sup>73</sup>

The realisation that one needs community to build a life as a same-sex couple had led Yacine and Mariama to ask Nafissatou for help in organising their wedding. Visibility or claiming rights and recognition in wider society was not at the basis of their decision to get married, but rather their wedding was a way to connect with other *gays* and *lesbiennes*.<sup>74</sup> Yacine has lived abroad since she finished high school in 2013, so she did not have a big network of *lesbienne* friends in Senegal. Mariama had been thinking about joining an organisation for *lesbiennes*, but she did not consider it safe to do so. Yacine commented, “*Il y a toujours des gens qui entrent dans ces organisations juste pour avoir des infos, et après ils dénoncent les gens... c’est mieux de rester dans l’ombre*” (F: There are always people who enter such organisations just to gather information, after which they expose people... It is better to stay in the shadows).<sup>75</sup> Precisely because of their distance to these networks, they needed the help of someone else, someone who was well-embedded in such networks, to make their wedding a success. It had been quite a search to first find, and then convince, Nafissatou to meet with them. Having witnessed the malicious infiltration of same-sex circles before, Nafissatou had initially been reluctant to assist two women who were unknown to her networks. After a number of long conversations over the phone with Yacine, and in person with Mariama, she had come to trust the women’s intentions, and she agreed to pursue with the organisation. Despite the risks of organising such an event, they found a way to organise the wedding.

According to Nafissatou, their wedding was the first ever female same-sex white wedding organised in Dakar, with a white dress, a three-tier cake to cut, wedding rings, and two witnesses. During the event, they shared their wish to be the first same-sex couple to organise a *ngente* (W: name-giving ceremony traditionally organised a week after the birth of a child) with other *lesbiennes* and *gays* in a couple of years. And a day after the wedding, when two *gay* men stopped by Nafissatou’s house while we were still there cleaning up the party from the night before, Yacine and Mariama got into a conversation with the men about organising a *mbaxal*, a meal that is typically organised for women in the week after their wedding to discuss married life and sex with female

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Mariama, 31 March 2021.

<sup>74</sup> In addition to mediated panics about alleged same-sex marriages happening in Senegal, anti-queer voices often refer to same-sex marriage and state that these will never be allowed. Anima Adjepong gives the example of Ghana, where the president reiterated in 2021 that same-sex marriage will not happen under his reign. Similarly, in Nigeria, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act was passed in 2013. In both cases, sexual rights activists had never demanded for the right to marriage. Instead, queer activists demand access to health, education, employment, and other basic rights, such as being able to live their lives without fear for discrimination and violence (Adjepong 2023).

<sup>75</sup> Conversation with Yacine, 15 June 2020.

friends and relatives, in the next couple of weeks.<sup>76</sup> Paradoxically, the risky choice to organise a same-sex event at this moment in Senegal, enabled Yacine to construct her life as apparently heterosexual. Yacine and Mariama had plans to have a child together, but knew that they would also need to present a husband to Yacine's family. Mariama had already been married and subsequently divorced, and she has two children from this marriage, so there was less pressure on her to get married. To find a *gay* man willing to marry Yacine, they sought the help of other *gays* and *lesbiennes* to discuss their plans with. Their wedding thus also served the purpose of building a network of friends with whom to discuss and realise their future plans.

While the wedding was organised with utmost care to avoid drawing the attention of the neighbourhood and other outsiders, the relationship between Mariama and Yacine was perhaps not a total secret to everyone beyond this “community of secrecy” in which the wedding was organised. Whenever Mariama was in Dakar, she stayed with her mother and her younger siblings. Having seen both Mariama and Yacine wear their new wedding rings, I asked Mariama if her mother would not ask her about her new ring. She responded,

*Bien sûr, elle m'a demandé deux fois: 'mais toi, tu t'es mariée avec qui?' Il y a même une de ses amies qui a dit: 'mais pourquoi tu lui demandes ça? Elle n'est pas mariée.' Et elle dit: 'Ah tu sais, les enfants d'aujourd'hui-là, ils font toujours ce qu'ils veulent. Peut-être elle s'est mariée et moi je ne suis pas au courant.' Et je sais pas... j'ai dit ça à Yacine: 'je pense qu'elle sait quelque chose.' Mais connaissant ma maman, je sais que même si elle sait quelque chose, elle ne va pas m'en parler. Elle va laisser comme ça la chose couler quoi. Et moi, bon, peut-être si, et seulement si, je suis vraiment obligée de lui en parler, je le ferai. Mais si non, je ne pense pas le faire. Mais je sais qu'elle a des doutes en fait. Elle me voit avec Yacine. Elle a vu le cadeau d'anniversaire que Yacine m'a offert, qui a écrit 'soulmate' et tout ça. Elle n'est pas bête, je la connais. Mais tant qu'elle ne dira rien, moi aussi je vais rien dire. Je vais jouer le jeu comme ça* (F: Of course, she asked me twice: 'But who did you marry?' One of her friends even said: 'But why are you asking her that? She's not married.' And she said: 'Oh, you know, kids these days, they always do what they want. Maybe she's married and I don't know.' And I don't know... I told Yacine: 'I think she knows something.' But knowing my mum, I know that even if she does know something, she's not going to say

<sup>76</sup> Traditionally, newly married women organise an afternoon with her close female friends and kin, after having spent her first nights with her husband. The married woman will prepare *mbaxal*, a doughy rice dish seasoned with chili pepper and lemon juice that is prepared during nuptial ceremonies. It is often prepared on the 3rd or 8th day after the wedding, to celebrate that the bride has lost her virginity – and using the occasion to talk and teach her about sex, albeit through indirect speech. *Mbaxal* is considered a women's dish, and it is also shared by women during the month of Ramadan, when they are menstruating and thus do not fast. I learned about the tradition of *mbaxal* from Nafissatou (Interview with Nafissatou, 19 April 2021).

anything to me. She'll just let it go. And me, well, maybe if, and only if, I really have to talk to her about it, I will. But if not, I don't think I will. But I know she's having doubts. She sees me with Yacine. She saw the birthday present Yacine gave me, with 'soulmate' written on it and all that. She's not stupid, I know her. But as long as she doesn't say anything, I'm not going to say anything either. I'll play the game like that).<sup>77</sup>

The way Mariama's mother avoids pushing Mariama to say anything about her ring shows how secrecy is a "choreography" in which different people are involved, each acting out their part to keep things unspoken (Bakuri, Spronk, and Van Dijk 2020). Even if Mariama's mother knows what is going on between Mariama and Yacine, the two actively maintain a sense of not-knowing towards each other. Keeping this secret is an expression of Mariama's mother's care towards Mariama, and it is a shared concern for both Mariama and her mother, on whom public knowledge of her daughter's same-sex relationship would also reflect negatively (see De Klerk 2012).

## Conclusion

Growing public debate about LGBTQI+ sexualities jeopardises so-called wicked lives in Senegal. The 2021 proposal to further criminalise LGBTQI+ identities, by defining LGBTQI+ identities and then criminalising these, reveals not only growing anti-queer sentiments, but it also signals an investment of political and religious actors to freeze identities. My interlocutors in this chapter, as opposed to those in Chapter One, mostly stay away from these debates, looking instead for ways to avoid sexual rights discourse to live their dissident lives. They oscillate between same-sex and cross-sex commitments, tapping into the support networks of sexual rights- and sex worker associations, while also retaining a critical distance from them. They respond to particular expectations of femininity, sexual restraint, conjugality, and motherhood by developing *pexe jigéen* (W: women's solutions) that enable them to avoid coming into full view, which would make them vulnerable to criticism and stigma. Through their engagement with a variety of groups, from religious groups to *lesbienne* networks, and to their own families, women find ways to navigate potential stigma by remaining elusive, and sometimes by maintaining secrecy. Whether it is the shifting ambiguity of religious and gender appearances that Astou embodies, or the tricks and humorous deceit that Ndella and Arame played to escape stigma: by playing with people's perceptions of them, these women have found various ways to circumvent direct confrontation about their relationships.

In many of my interlocutors' stories, financial independence appeared to be indispensable for being able to defy family expectations. Providing for one's family

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Mariama, 31 March 2022.

not only refrains family members from speaking out against the sources of income, as Ndella's story about her doing *mbaraan* revealed earlier, but it also provides women with the means to move away from their families in an attempt to live their lives as they desire. The leeway that financial autonomy affords women to make their own decisions does not, however, set them free from family expectations and judgement. The figure of the trickster has helped me to understand how women like Ndella and Arame devise creative solutions to navigating stigma. Like tricksters, supposedly wicked women depend on their wit and ingenuity for their survival and to navigate and balance social expectations and personal desires. Like Otu's (2022) "amphibious subjects," so-called wicked women demonstrate an adaptability and flexibility towards their appearances and attitudes, which allows them to carve out some space for their dissident practices. Such craftiness creates room for dissidence, but adopting a trickster modality in itself is not enough to remain elusive. In a context in which disclosure and exposure increasingly characterise the Senegalese public debate, women's craftiness needs to be embedded in a moral economy of not-knowing.

This moral economy of not-knowing includes the "choreography of secrecy" that women dance with their families who are equally concerned about keeping dissident practices a secret. Public knowledge of their daughter's dissident practices would also reflect negatively on family members, and therefore Mariama's mother does not pry into her daughter's relationship with Yacine. Moreover, for a woman like Coura, who "goes out at night," avoiding identification as a "prostitute" and going by multiple names allows her to maintain a sense of not-knowing towards her family, but also towards Senegalese health authorities. *Ni génn guddi*, in other words, create a moral economy of craftiness and not-knowing that characterises urban life for women in Senegal.

Although going out at night signals women's dependency on men to make ends meet (Foley and Dramé 2013), it also affords women some financial autonomy to provide for their families (Fanta) and to postpone marriage (Coura). Dependency on others paradoxically brings women some freedom. This reveals how elusiveness and secrecy provide room for dissident practices while women simultaneously maintain responsibilities and attachments to their families. Family ties remain important for Ndella too, despite the many challenges that she faced with her family, both when she lived with her aunt, and later when her family found out about her romantic relationship with Arame. And where women cannot always count on their biological families for support, they develop kin relations with each other that allow them to survive. The community of secrecy that has emerged through the organisation of Yacine and Mariama's wedding shows, similarly, that there are things that can only be realised as a group. In the next chapter, the importance of living together takes centre stage, as I show how "odd" kinship bonds (Haraway 2016) are formed as a way of creating and transmitting a *savoir vivre* together.

## CHAPTER 3

# Women's “oddkin” bonds and the cultivation of *savoir vivre*

Ramadan has ended, and today is the feast of Korité (Eid-al-Fitr). After a month of fasting and resting – most *ñi génn guddi* do not work during Ramadan – we share a late breakfast of *laax* (millet porridge) with *Nafissatou*.<sup>78</sup> Mame Diarra is impatient to go home to clean her room and get ready for the night. I offer to join her. Arriving at Mame Diarra's house, we encounter a lively group. Mame Diarra's sister and some of her friends are engaged in cheerful banter as they prepare the food, cutting large quantities of potatoes, onions, and chicken, a meal typically prepared for Korité. In a corner of the compound, the men are playing a game of Ludo on a phone. Cigarette smoke circles up from the group, and beer cans litter the sand. Mame Diarra's room is indeed a mess. Dirty laundry lies scattered on the floor, which has not been swept in a while. She collects her laundry and I start to make her bed. When we are done, she says, with a mischievous smile: "Bala ma génn ci guddi, damay def curaay ci néeg bi. Qui sait quel invité je ramènerai à la maison ce soir!" (W/F: Before I leave tonight, I'll put some curaay in the room.<sup>79</sup> Who knows what visitor I'll bring home tonight!) Satisfied with the result of our cleaning session, Mame Diarra takes a little black dress from her wardrobe that I had given to her the last time I came to Senegal, from her wardrobe. She tries it on, inspects herself in the mirror, and then parades outside to show her outfit to the other women. "Shiii, tey danga sañse Diarra!" (W: Shiii, today you are well dressed Diarra!) exclaimed Coumba. "Loes dafa ma ko jëndal. La prochaine fois day indil ay boucles en or" (W/F: Loes bought it for me. Next time she will bring me golden earrings), Mame Diarra responds. "Oohh Mame Diarra, tey danga wacce koñ bi!" (W: Oohh Mame Diarra, today you are stealing the show!), Coumba proceeds. The women are in a festive mood, happy to share the feast of Korité as a family, and eager to get back to work.<sup>80</sup>

*Wacce koñ bi* is a Wolof expression with multiple meanings. It literally translates to "bringing down the neighbourhood," and it can be said to compliment someone on their stunning appearance. This was the case when Coumba said that Mame Diarra was "stealing the show" with her outfit. Having an appearance that stands out is highly valued in Senegal, and it is important for *ñi génn guddi* like Mame Diarra who draw upon their appearance to attract clients. In the next chapter, I explore a different meaning of *wacce koñ bi*: when uttered in the networks of *lesbiennes*, *wacce* refers to publicly humiliating someone by loudly denouncing their involvement in same-sex intimacies. Although they are two distinct meanings of the same expression, both connotations indicate how the presence of others is an important factor that informs people's status in their social world.

Coumba, who had complimented Mame Diarra that she had "*wacce koñ bi*," is a friend of Mame Diarra who had been staying with her for a month. Unable to save money to pay her rent during the month of Ramadan, when she was not working, she had left her

<sup>78</sup>All the names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.

<sup>79</sup>Incense. *Curaay* is widely used in Senegalese homes, and it is said to have aphrodisiac qualities. As such, it is among women's seductive strategies, collectively called *mokk pooj*. See Gilbert (2017) for an elaborate account of *mokk pooj*.

<sup>80</sup>Fieldnotes, 13 May 2021.

room to stay with Mame Diarra. Sharing a room and having friends and family over for a longer period of time, is not uncommon in many Senegalese households. Family members who move to the city for work or education are often hosted for lengthy periods, and friends may offer to share their bed with a friend who needs a place to stay, be it for practical reasons, such as proximity to work, or for financial reasons. Mame Diarra's house is no exception, and many people have passed through – some for days, others for weeks or even months. The people she hosts, in addition to facing financial difficulties, often had compromised ties with their own families. Some had been kicked out by their families, and others preferred the freedom that they found in Mame Diarra's house to live their dissident lives. In this chapter, the focus is on these places and moments where so-called wicked women get together to care for each other, producing particular forms of sociality.

In the previous chapter, I analysed how women who choose to abstain from public debates about gender norms and sexual rights displayed various forms of craftiness to negotiate space and time for their dissident lives. Networks of support and kinship are vital for women to realise such spaces, and to find support when things become difficult, materially as well as socially. Economic precarity or uncertainty gives rise to networks and associations in which people pool resources, give and receive help, and maintain ties of solidarity (Rodima-Taylor and Bähre 2014). Economic precarity and the lack of a public social safety net increase the need for strong social and kinship ties for everyone, because of the dependency on others to sustain your family (Bass and Sow 2006) and to borrow money to be able to participate in family ceremonies where one is expected to give gifts (Buggenhagen 2012). An awareness of the difficulties of life-making and the resulting necessity of networks of relationships and support to overcome the hardships of life, gives rise to convivial ways of living in which people secure life through their relationships with others (Nyamnjoh 2017). Where the previous chapter revolved around women's craftiness to maintain elusiveness around their dissident lives, this chapter explores how such craftiness is learned. Women's craftiness, which I refer to as *savoir vivre* (F: knowing how to live well), is a skill that is developed, learned and transmitted together with others.

To understand this process, the question that guides this chapter is the following: *How do so-called wicked women create and transmit savoir vivre together in a challenging urban context?* Drawing upon new kinship studies, African feminist theorising on motherhood, and ideas about the social obligations to share resources as a result of sharing a physical presence with people (James Ferguson 2021), I argue that the kin bonds that my interlocutors have established with each other enable the development, sharing, and transmission of *savoir vivre*, a knowing how to live well. This *savoir vivre* relates to navigating anti-queer sentiments, economic precarity, and changing communal or family expectations. With

this *savoir vivre*, women are able to create liveable lives for themselves, generating forms of sociality that encourage inclusion into their own networks that they create with other so-called wicked women (which I will define and explain, following Haraway (2016), as “oddkin”) as well as into people’s biological families and society at large.

Strong social ties are not just a necessity for so-called wicked women, but the particular challenges that they face in securing liveable lives for themselves leads to particular expressions of kinship. Contrary to popular representation of sexually dissident persons in Senegal as being self- rather than community-centred, and their relationships as loveless, interest-based, and instigated by greed or naivety (Mbaye 2021), my interlocutors showcase the importance of togetherness, of sharing, and of communal values, for survival. The kin bonds that they develop among themselves are crucial as they allow for supposedly wicked lives to exist and develop in negotiation and interaction with normative kinship bonds (Andrikopoulos and Spronk 2023; Bradway and Freeman 2022). Kinship is also important because it embeds people in the networks necessary for imagining and building a future (Andrikopoulos and Spronk 2023).

I approach kinship empirically as I explore the making of relations between women who refer to each other in kinship terms, most commonly through mother-daughter relationships. Mothering bonds appear to be central to processes of learning and developing a *savoir vivre*. Mothering practices take shape through women’s mentoring, housing, clothing, feeding and educating of their daughters. These kin formations reveal, firstly, the importance of space: in a context of spatial constraints, where family members often share bedrooms with multiple siblings or cousins, the space for dissident practices is not evident. Second, they shed light on the relevance of presumably odd connections between *ñi génn guddi* and *lesbiennes*. Although often considered to be living different lives and to have different concerns in terms of health and rights, my research shows that *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* often live together and share a *savoir vivre* in networks of kinship. Third, these women’s oddkin bonds reveal the important role of mothering in building a collective and transmitting the *savoir vivre* that is necessary to survive and sustain supposedly wicked lives.

## **New kinship studies and the importance of “oddkin” in Senegal**

I draw upon the work of new studies in kinship and African feminist theorising about motherhood to develop my argument about the emergence of *savoir vivre* in Senegal. Kinship has been central to the discipline of anthropology as it has sought to understand the social organisation of societies. Kinship studies have evolved away from the early structural-functionalist understandings of kinship as genealogical relations, which had a focus on the nuclear family as the centre of the social (re)production of societies. Such



understandings of kinship as the most central social bonds that derive from procreation, and thus “natural,” have been criticised for being Euro-American (Schneider 1984). New kinship studies have reconceptualised understandings of kinship as various forms of “relatedness” (Carsten 2000) that extend well beyond biology and reproduction. Kinship studies were revitalised by feminist scholarship on gender and personhood (Yanagisako and Collier 1987), and through the development of new technologies of assisted reproduction and practices of adoption (Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Strathern 1992). Forms of lesbian and gay kinship (Weston 1991) have, furthermore, helped us to rethink how families are not given entities, but can take different shapes. “Kinship is not, therefore, a *sui generis* field of relationships whose value persists unchanged through a lifetime [...] but a fraught and formative field in which meanings are constantly being made and unmade” (Jackson 2017, 102). Despite a much broader understanding of kinship today, scholarship on “queer” kinship still remains largely focused on the Global North (Dankwa 2021). In this regard, Serena Dankwa’s work on same-sex desiring women in Ghana is important to begin to understand how kinship can take shape in such a context, “as an active mode of relating” in women’s everyday practices (*ibid.*, 41). I build upon her work to explore the importance of kinship bonds for the relations among so-called wicked women in Senegal.

Kinship ties in Senegal have always been much larger than the nuclear family. Ties with extended family members are constantly reinforced by the systematic practices of pairing cousins with each other, or by fostering out children to half-brothers or -sisters, among other things (Sylla 1978). Sons are paired with one of their (female) cousins, with whom he develops close bonds. This “preferred sister” is expected to organise his wedding and, in return, he is expected to name his first-born daughter after her (*ibid.*, 126). Kinship ties in Senegal are not only predicated upon blood ties, they may be developed between people with “extensive shared social experience” (Bass and Sow 2006, 91), including between individuals who shared certain rites of passage, like circumcision or attending the same school (*ibid.*, 90; Sow 1985). Such practices lead to “webs of kinship” whereby resources and responsibilities are shared between the many different people who are connected to each other through these bonds (Alber, Häberlein and Martin 2010).

For women, social and financial support networks are a long-standing tradition, and these networks have included institutionalised bonds of friendship and kinship. In the absence of formal banking, monthly *tontines* (credit rotation schemes) allow women to pool resources to be able to save for larger expenditures. They are valuable for women in a context where family obligations and community demands are high, and where saving is challenging (Guerin 2006). *Tontines* were crucial for women to be able to take up commercial activity during the economic decline in the 1980s, and the subsequent Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s, which required households

to devise new strategies to gather an income and to diversify their work activities. In addition to its financial purposes, the weekly, bi-weekly, or sometimes monthly meetings of these groups have always served social purposes of fostering female friendships away from male or family control (Bop 1995).

These female friendship bonds are called *ndey dikke* (W: the mother or twin of my choosing). In women's organising in *tontines* or *mbootaay*, women's associations where women of the same age cohort gathered regularly to pool resources, share gifts, and have a good time together, such mother-child or sibling friendships are formed.<sup>81</sup> *Ndey dikke* are one-on-one relationships between women in which friendship and intimacy, on the one hand, and reciprocal gifts, on the other hand, come together (A. Kane 2002). Talking about sex and eroticism has always been part of these women's gatherings, as the homogeneity in terms of gender and age relieved many taboos. Erotic *sabar* dances are often part of these gatherings, and with their *ndey dikke* women share tips about how to manage and seduce their husbands. These bonds blur the boundaries between friendship, eroticism, and kinship, as women share many things, including sometimes same-sex intimacies (Oudenhuisen 2018). The long-standing importance of strong female kinship and friendship bonds puts my interlocutors' kinship bonds in context and conversation with other forms of female conviviality in Senegal. Although these friendship bonds, like *supi* in Ghana (Dankwa 2021), and "mummy-baby" relationships in South Africa (Gunkel 2009), have provided room for same-sex erotic intimacies, the perception of such friendships might change over time. *Supi* in Ghana has increasingly become equated with "lesbianism" (Dankwa 2021), which points at the backlash that visibility and discursiveness can generate for women's same-sex bonds.

When conceptualising kinship in the context of so-called wicked women in Senegal, I also draw upon African feminist theorising about the importance of motherhood in African societies to understand how women's kinship bonds are often expressed as mothering. Scholars like Amadiume (1987; 1997), Oyèwùmí (1997), and Steady (2011) have argued against (Western) assumptions that motherhood equals women's oppression and their relegation to the domestic sphere. Instead, mothers have always also been economically, politically, and spiritually engaged. These qualities attributed to motherhood in African contexts are, however, shaped by conjugal- and hetero-normativity (Debele 2023a). Moving away from essentialising ideas of motherhood and focusing instead on mothering as a quotidian practice of a diversity of women who mother "children who are not supposed to exist" (Gumbs in Debele 2023a), allows for a broader understanding of the importance of mothering for the construction of alternative forms of sociality. Following Debele

<sup>81</sup> The word *mbootaay* is commonly used to signify a variety of active women's associations, often in the domain of credit rotations and saving schemes, and sometimes in combination with social gatherings (J.L. Diouf 2003).

(2023b), I argue that mothering is about creating the possibilities to sustain supposedly wicked lives by sharing wisdom, knowledge, and resources collectively. In this chapter, I look at various forms of mothering and how these are constitutive of a *savoir vivre* that enables so-called wicked women to craft liveable lives.

In addition to this conceptualisation of mothering, I have been inspired by Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of "oddkin" for an analysis of how and where women's kin bonds take shape. In *Staying with the trouble*, Haraway reclaims kin to mean not merely blood relatives ("godkin") but also those whose company we choose to be in ("oddkin"). "Odd" here means unexpected or unusual, but also suggests the odd ones out. Oddkin brings the odd ones together in kinship bonds. Generating oddkin is about "mak[ing] kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (ibid., 1). Generating oddkin, Haraway writes, is about becoming-with others in order to create a liveable, flourishing world. It is about surviving collectively in precarious times, and it thus depends on "response-ability," which Haraway defines as "cultivating collective knowing and doing" (ibid., 34). "Making kin as oddkin, rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin," she furthermore writes, "troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible... What shape is this kinship, where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what?" (ibid., 2). I refer to the cultivation of response-ability among my interlocutors as *savoir vivre*. Haraway takes a trans-species perspective, considering how all critters, human and other-than-human, are not bounded units, but rather become through their interactions with one another. Thinking with and across social groups that are often considered separately in political debates and policy practice, makes these connections between *lesbiennes* and *ni génn guddi* somewhat "odd." *Lesbiennes* and *ni génn guddi* are thought to have different concerns in terms of health and rights, and they may appear to be living different lives. My interlocutors reveal, however, the many different kin relationships that they mutually entertain.

When I attended a workshop in July 2021 for *gays*, *lesbiennes*, and *ni génn guddi*, organised by a sexual health and -rights NGO, I was struck by the absence of *ni génn guddi*.<sup>82</sup> I had been invited by Fadiga who, in addition to her work for women's football as I elaborated upon in Chapter One, regularly attended workshops and meetings with sexual health and -rights organisations. What was supposed to be a joint meeting to discuss shared struggles, did not really work out in practice. When the workshop leader attempted to compare the stereotyping and discrimination of *gays* and *lesbiennes* to *ni génn guddi*, he approached this by asking the group to draw a *ku génn guddi* as they imaged them. The resulting drawings showed women in mini-skirts and -dresses, with heavy make-up, wigs and bleached skins, and with a bottle of alcohol or a cigarette in their hand.

<sup>82</sup> In the context of this NGO meeting, they were referred to as *travailleuses de sexe* (F: sex workers).

When discussing the drawings in the group and pointing at the participants' stereotyping of *ni génn guddi* with these visual clues, he urged the group to look beyond such stereotypes which, he said, only worked to emphasise the differences, where in reality the connections between *ni génn guddi*, *lesbiennes* and *gays* are much more relevant. In an attempt to defend herself from the suggestion that she was distancing herself from *ni génn guddi*, Fadiga responded: “*Mais les lesbiennes et les prostituées ne sont pas des amies! Je ne connais aucune prostituée, je ne les fréquente pas. C'est seulement les gays et les prostituées qui sont des amis.*” (F: But *lesbiennes* and prostitutes are not friends! I don't know any of them, I do not frequent them. Only *gays* and prostitutes are friends.)<sup>83</sup>

Because of their co-presence in sexual health and -rights NGOs, *gay* men and *ni génn guddi* – or Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) and *travailleuses de sexe* (F: “sex workers”) in NGO-parlance – have indeed been targeted together as so-called “key populations” at risk of contracting HIV. “Key populations” is a term used by health workers to designate those groups most vulnerable to contracting HIV: “sex workers,” men who have sex with men, and intravenous drug users. It is only recently that some of the NGOs that had thus far focused their work on men and HIV/AIDS prevention, have started to include *lesbiennes* in their work. In that sense, Fadiga was right to say that *lesbiennes* and *ni génn guddi* hardly connect, at least not in an institutional setting. If they have only recently begun to connect to each other in the institutional sphere, they do, however, meet in other circles of support and care. In scholarly work, the social relations between “prostitutes” and sexually dissident men have been documented, for example in Gaudio's (2009) work on *'yan daudu* (“men who act like women”) and *karuwai* (“prostitutes”) in northern Nigeria, as well as in Chauncey's (1997) work on the sexual subculture of working-class gay men, effeminate homosexual men called “fairies,” and “prostitutes” in early twentieth century America. Despite Fadiga's assurance that “prostitutes” and *lesbiennes* are not friends, I found many connections between *ni génn guddi* and *lesbiennes*. Beyond the supposed boundaries between heterosexual sex work and same-sex love, *ni génn guddi* and *lesbiennes* have developed meaningful kinship bonds as a way to share knowledge and resources for survival in an urban context.

Kinship bonds between *lesbiennes* and *ni génn guddi* develop in part because of the spaces that they share in town. Their co-presence in bars and houses gives rise to forms of responsibility and response-ability that Haraway talks about. In an “essay on the share,” James Ferguson (2021) argues that presence (being physically there) provokes social obligations to share. Dominant ideas about sociality, including notions of what to share and with whom, often draw upon ideas of membership of a group or a nation. Ferguson argues that physical presence, instead, should be considered as a position from which to claim your part of a share. Sharing a physical space drives claims to resources,

<sup>83</sup> Field notes, 10 July 2021, Dakar.

even if people are not considered members or right-bearers. To give an example, he describes township residents in the Global South who claim access to infrastructural and public goods such as water and electricity, by illegally tapping these goods from the urban network (ibid., 28-35). Sharing does not mean that the people who share hold equal positions, and the type of sharing that people claim with their presence, “demand sharing,” is fiercely contested, and often granted only grudgingly under duress. The obligation to sharing does not necessarily come from a feeling of compassion, and it can invite anger or irritation. In Senegal, the Senegalese cultural value of *teraanga* (W: hospitality) expects people to share and to be generous. *Teraanga* refers to warmly welcoming visitors to your house and taking good care of them with food, gifts, or cash if you have it. The value of *teraanga* also carries the expectation that you offer others your help whenever you are asked (Sylla 1978). It fits with the obligation to share with people whom you share a presence with. In the following section, I demonstrate how such sharing-through-presence takes shape in a house of *kóoba*, where *ñi génn guddi*, *lesbiennes*, and drug addicts share rooms and resources. Mame Diarra, a *ku génn guddi* in her early fifties, mothered various tenants and passers-by in this house, and her care for a variety of *ñi génn guddi*, *lesbiennes* and drug addicts is illustrative of the oddkin bonds that develop among so-called wicked women.

### **Mame Diarra and “the house of *kóoba*”: A form of odd mothering**

In 2020, I was introduced to Mame Diarra, a *ku génn guddi* in her early fifties. She had been living in a family home with her siblings since 1984, a house that they affectionally called “*la maison des kóoba*” (F: the house of *kóoba*). Situated in one of the popular neighbourhoods of Dakar, the house functions as a safe haven for *kóoba*, a code name for social outcasts like *lesbiennes*, *ñi génn guddi*, bandits, and aggressors, and their seemingly odd connections, often established through their nightlife encounters (Oudenhuijsen 2021b). *Kóoba* also refers to the embodied knowledge of what happens in the milieu of nightlife and of sexual dissidence, as well as how (not) to talk about that. *Kóoba* is derived from the beer brand *Kóoba* that was produced in Senegal in the 1960s, and it refers to all those who drank *kóoba* beer in bars.

*Kóoba* can thus be likened to the “cultivating [of] collective knowing and doing” in Haraway’s definition of oddkin. Mame Diarra’s house of *kóoba* is a house where biological family and oddkin come together, as she and her siblings have always welcomed friends and new acquaintances alike, offering a place to stay for those in need.

The family has lived there since the 1980s in different constellations, depending on work commitments or family (marriage) arrangements elsewhere. The house is a family home that was built by Mame Diarra’s stepfather, the father of her half-brothers and

-sisters, in the early 1980s. Mame Diarra lives here with two of her half-brothers, their wives, her half-sister, and their children, some of which have been adopted. The house consists of four bedrooms along the length of the courtyard, a sandy square where the women and men chat, drink, smoke, and eat together throughout the day. In the evening, most of them go out. Some women go out at night (they are *ni génn guddi*), and most men also frequent the bars to hang out with friends or to try to earn some money at night. After years of saving money by going out at night, Mame Diarra invested in the family home and had two additional rooms built on the compound in 2019 and 2020.

Mame Diarra had been absent from the house for seven years around the turn of the century, when her younger half-sister invited her to come to The Gambia to work with her. Her sister had been living in The Gambia for couple of years already, where she went out at night. At the time, in the mid-1990s, Mame Diarra had worked for years as a *mbindaan* (W: housemaid) in Dakar, following in the footsteps of her mother, who had taken up this job when she moved from her village in the Saluum region in Senegal to Dakar. For many women, work as a housemaid is their first experience away from their families, particularly for those who move to Dakar from rural areas. The work as a *mbindaan* hardly pays the bills and many women start doing *mbaraan* to add to their income (Aduayi-Diop 2010). This was also how Mame Diarra had first encountered commercial sex. After working hours, she would go “*de Maiga à Maiga*” (F: from Maiga to Maiga), offering sex for 1,500 F CFA (about two euros and 30 cents), to top up her income.<sup>84</sup> “*Parfois on faisait une semaine sans faire bouillir la marmite*” (F: Sometimes we went a week without boiling the pot), Mame Diarra said, referring to the fact that sometimes her family would not cook a proper meal for an entire week, because of a lack of money. So, when her sister proposed that Mame Diarra come to The Gambia, promising a better-paying job, she agreed. She would work in the house of a certain man who, Mame Diarra only discovered upon her arrival in The Gambia, was a pimp. She had received the address of a house in Serrekunda, the largest urban centre in The Gambia close to the capital city Banjul. When she arrived in Serrekunda she was given a mini dress and high heels. She said that she had not understood why they gave her these clothes, and she had told them that she had come to work. When I asked her if she did not know what type of work she was going to do there, she said no. She had always been a housemaid, and she had been told that she would work as a housemaid, and that she would just earn a bit more. Despite her unpreparedness, she started going out at night and sent most of her earnings back to Dakar to her mother and stepfather.

Before Mame Diarra left for The Gambia, when she was around twenty-five years old, she had been married, and recently divorced. About this period she said: “*Dafa mettiwoon*.

<sup>84</sup> “Maiga” is what many small roadside restaurants are called. Many of them are run by Malians, and Maiga is a common surname in Mali (Interview with Mame Diarra, 17 September 2020).

*Sama jëkkër dafa soxorwoon, il me battait violemment chaque fois qu'il était ivre, ce qui était le cas tout le temps. C'est pourquoi je ne veux plus de mari*" (F/W: It was incredibly difficult. My husband was mean, he beat me up really badly whenever he was drunk. Which he was all the time. This is why I don't want a husband anymore). In addition to having a violent husband, her family-in-law, and her own family too, criticised Mame Diarra for failing to have children:

*Ba tey dañu wax ne: 'sa génération ñepp am nañu doom. Demal wuut dóom.' Ils n'arrêtent pas de me le dire, et même mon petit frère me dit: 'caga nga, va chercher des enfants au lieu de te prostituer'* (W/F: They keep telling me: 'your entire generation has children. Go search for children.' They keep telling me this, and even my little brother tells me: 'you're a prostitute, go search for children instead of prostituting yourself').

Mame Diarra may have never birthed children, but she cares for two children whom she can call her own. One of them is the son of her ex-boyfriend from The Gambia. The boy lost both of his parents, and with no other family in Senegal, Mame Diarra adopted him. The other boy is the son of her sister, who also passed away. These sons live with her in Dakar, in the family home that she moved back to after seven years in The Gambia. In 2003, Mame Diarra returned to Senegal, after she had travelled for a burial. Upon her return to Dakar, she resumed going out to a night club in Plateau, in the city centre. A little later, she found a more rewarding way of engaging in commercial sex, *puces yi* (F/W: sim cards), which allowed her to stay home mostly. *Puces yi* is a system of already-identified phone numbers that you buy for 2,500 FCFA (about 4 euros). In addition, you pay 15,000 FCFA (about 24 euros) a week for the person managing the sim for you. This person advertises your number via websites and social media networks, after which potential clients call you directly. In a brief phone conversation, the client and the woman negotiate on the price, time, and location. "*Moo gën a noppale*" (W: This is more relaxed), Mame Diarra said about this way of working. You can stay home as clients visit you at home, and they generally offer quite a bit more than those visiting bars. Some offer 10,000 FCFA (16 euros), but others go up to 30,000 (48 euros). "*Puces yi.. noonu laa tabaxe fi*" (W: It is with the sim cards that I have constructed the rooms here), she said, pointing at the newly constructed rooms on their compound.

Mame Diarra rented out one of the rooms to Ndeye, a thirty-three-year-old *lesbienne* who, after breaking up with her partner with whom she had lived together, was looking for a place to stay. With the rent that Ndeye paid, the family could pay the water and electricity bills, which temporarily eased the stress on the family in terms of paying the bills and who was to contribute. It was not always appreciated that Mame Diarra decided who she invited to their home. As a half-sister, she is not a legal heir of the house, and this inequality in her position regularly led to conflict among the siblings. When Ndeye's

*commerce ambulant* (F: itinerant trade) in clothing failed to yield enough revenues to pay the rent for three consecutive months, an argument broke out between Mame Diarra and her siblings, who thought that Mame Diarra was keeping the rent for herself. When Ndeye left the room, tension arose over who would decide who could next occupy the room. This tension over who was to occupy the room after Ndeye had left shows how care and conflict go hand in hand in kinship relations (Horton 2018).



Ndeye in her room with a set of boxer shorts that she had on sale, October 2020. Photo: Loes Oudenhuijsen.

Despite such conflicts about who gets to decide who occupies what room, to whom rent is paid, and who is then responsible for paying the collective water and electricity bills, Mame Diarra's house of *kóoba* is a place where many people have passed through. The second room that had been built in 2019-2020 was not directly rented out. In addition to remaining a storage room for some building materials, the room was occupied by Fatima, a woman who had been living on the streets in their neighbourhood. She had been kicked out of her family home because of a heroin addiction and mental health crises. Mame Diarra's brother had taken Fatima home one day when he saw how she was the object of mockery in the streets and was at risk of being beaten or harassed. When he brought her home, Mame Diarra invited Fatima to sleep in their courtyard. Fatima's presence in their neighbourhood had compelled them to share their home with her.

A couple of years after having returned to this house of *kóoba*, Mame Diarra had met Nafissatou, who worked for a health NGO at the time. Nafissatou invited Mame Diarra



to participate in workshops on HIV-prevention and treatment, which she attended. In the years that followed, she attended numerous workshops on human rights, health care, and psychosocial support for “key populations.” It was during the workshops with Nafissatou’s organisation that she had met *lesbiennes*. Nafissatou recalled of those workshops that “*Même si elle n’est pas lesbienne, elle sait parler avec elles, et tout le monde la connaît*” (F: Even if she [Mame Diarra] is not a *lesbienne*, she knows how to talk with them, and everyone knows her). In these trainings, she was taught to be a “*relais*” (F: support, intermediary) for any of the “key populations,” and to assist them in accessing healthcare, for example. After these trainings, Mame Diarra started to support people, who were often referred to her by Nafissatou to access healthcare. Her support for Fatima, for example, extended beyond offering her a place to sleep on their compound. She also accompanied her to CEPIAD (Centre de prise en charge intégré des addictions à Dakar, English: Integrated addiction treatment centre in Dakar) at the Fann Hospital, where Fatima received a methadone substitution treatment for her heroin addiction (Ndione 2016). “*Sama famille la. Dama wara jàppale*”<sup>85</sup> (W: It’s my family. I have to help), is how she expressed her role as a *relais* (support) for a woman like Fatima. She invoked kinship terminology to emphasise a sense of duty to care for others.

It is this invocation of kinship that brought me to study the different kinship bonds that Mame Diarra entertains within her family at home, with the people who pass through their house, and with those whom she has helped to access healthcare. Fatima received care and safety from Mame Diarra that she had never received from her own family. Unfortunately, Fatima died a year after I first saw her at Mame Diarra’s house. Paradoxically, the visibility as a household presumably comprised entirely of *caga* – because this is what the neighbourhood believes, according to Mame Diarra – may grant them more security and protects them from a lot of the stigma that they would otherwise face as individuals living with their biological families. At the same time, the fact that the house is a family home where everyone is familiar with nightlife and its associated risks, illicit activities, and stigmatised identities, such as *caga* and *lesbiennes*, does not mean that it is beacon of peace. Stigma about one’s supposed immorality does not always come from outsiders. Sometimes, it comes most fiercely from those to whom one is closest.

“*Déedet, ci mbedd mi kenn mësuma wax caga. Waaye ci sama famille dañu ko wax bës bu nekk!*” (W: No, on the streets I have never heard anyone call me prostitute yet. But in my family they call me that every day!).<sup>86</sup> Exclaimed Mame Diarra to me as we were discussing her relationships to her siblings. I asked her what exactly they call her.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Mame Diarra, 17 September 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Mame Diarra, 17 September 2020.

**Mame Diarra:** *caga bi ngay doon, caga bu amul doom, wala maggat bu caga bi. Ils disent, ‘t’aurais dû rester chez toi et construire une villa. La prostitution ne t’a rien apporté. Tu n’as même pas construit un étage sur la maison, tu n’as pas de voiture. D’autres ont de l’or, ils ont construit un château... toi, tu n’as rien.’ Ma famille me dit toutes ces choses.*

(W/F: You prostitute, the prostitute who has no children, or old prostitute. They say, ‘you should have been staying home to build a villa. Prostitution has not earned you anything. You have not even built a storey on the house; you do not have a car. Others, they have gold, they have built a castle... you, you have nothing.’ My family tells me all these things.

**Loes:** How do you respond to such criticism?

**Mame Diarra:** *Bu ñu wax maggat bu caga bi, dama ne: damay fey lépp. Bo feebare, dama lay toppaato. Boo xiife, damay fey. C’est vous qui devriez-vous occuper de cette vieille prostituée! Je suis avec Dieu, et j’irai avec Dieu.*

(W/F : When they tell me you old prostitute, I say: I pay everything. When you are sick, I take care of you. When you are hungry, I pay. It is you who should be looking after this old prostitute! I am with God, and I will go with God).

**Loes:** What does your family contribute to the household?

**Mame Diarra:** *Dara. Gisuma dara. Ci kër ga, sama rakk bu jigéen dafa génn. Faram ay bandit lañu, chaque jour un autre. Deful dara ci kër ga.*

(W/F: Nothing. I have not seen anything. In the house, my younger sister goes out. Her boyfriends are gangsters, another one every day. She does not contribute anything to the house).

Despite the fact that they have been living together as a family for decades, and despite the fact that, in many ways, the siblings, other relatives, and friends depend on one another for support, there are tensions, which sometimes erupt into heated arguments and even physical fights. Through kinship ties, people access care and support, but these ties simultaneously create hierarchies and inequalities that can lead to tensions and conflict. Care and conflict go hand in hand, and the intensely intimate bonds of kinship are marked by ambivalence and antagonisms (Geschiere 2013; Jackson 2017). The dynamics between Mame Diarra and her siblings, and the complications that arose when Ndeye joined the house for a couple of months, reveal how conflict and care go hand in hand, and that kinship relations can never be simply assumed. They are continuously made and remade, as adjustments and flexibility are required to deal with changing circumstances.

The logics of sharing in Mame Diarra’s house of *kóoba* also reveals how oddkin can substitute normative kinship bonds, when the latter do not provide the necessary security. The obligation to share as a result of physical presence reflects the way in which Mame

Diarra's house has come to be a "house of *kóoba*." Mame Diarra and her siblings did not intentionally create a *kóoba* house, but they have shared what they have with people they have met in the streets and in the bars they frequent, and whom they could help by offering them a place to stay. In a study of *gay* men in Dakar, Jason Ferguson (2017) also points at obligations to share. He writes how men share their earnings from commercial sex with others from the same social network, who have helped them obtain the necessary *savoir vivre* to earn money by selling sex in downtown Dakar. The mothering practices of Mame Diarra brought together Fatima, Ndeye, and other *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi*, and offered these women the room and resources to live their dissident lives.

### **Adji and the cultivation of *savoir vivre*: *Lesbienne* mothering**

Where Mame Diarra's house of *kóoba* had offered women the possibility to establish oddkin bonds and to provide direct care for women when needed, this section demonstrates how the substance of women's oddkin bonds constitutes the creation and transmission of *savoir vivre*. This knowing how to live well as a so-called wicked woman is an example of the forms of sociality that women create, and it sheds light on the importance of women's kinship bonds to get by in a context of gender panic. One of my interlocutors who displayed such *savoir vivre* was Adji. She was among the many visitors to Mame Diarra's house, regularly visiting the house when her then girlfriend was staying there for a while. Like Mame Diarra, Adji has shared her own house with many young *lesbiennes* who, for various reasons, temporarily needed a place to stay. Adji was twenty-four years old when I met her in 2021, but despite her young age, she has the life experience that enables her to care for others. Over the years, since her arrest in what became known as the first mediated "*lesbienne* scandal" in Senegal in 2013, Adji has gathered a family of about fifteen *lesbiennes* around her, whom she refers to as her children. In addition to providing housing to women, she shared her *savoir vivre* with these women, helping them navigate some of the challenges that had brought them to Adji's house, such as compromised ties with family, a lack of income or trouble with the police.

Adji was, she said herself, *précoce* (F: precocious, mature at a young age). When she was twelve years old, she quit school. Disinterested in school, and eager to discover the world beyond the protective confines of her family, she lived without a fixed home for a while. After a couple of years of roaming the streets of Dakar and staying with different friends, she opted for some stability and got married when she was fifteen. She had a child with her husband. They soon divorced and, after briefly living with her son, she decided to ask her mother to care for him so that she could continue, and expand, her business of selling household appliances. She rented a room in an apartment with other *kóoba*, primarily *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi*. After a couple of years, she remarried and moved in with her husband. When I met Adji in 2021, she had divorced again but

this marriage had allowed her to develop oddkin bonds with other *lesbiennes* whom she referred to as her children.

Age is not the decisive factor in determining who can be a mother to whom; indeed, Adjì is younger than many of her children. Adjì used her relatively stable financial and housing situation to help her children, which reveals some of the possibilities that marriage can afford women. Her own success as a trader, as well as her husband's financial situation, allowed Adjì to extend her care to others, by hosting friends whenever they needed it. These fifteen women have all lived with Adjì, at different moments and to different extents. They stayed with her and her husband, where Adjì provided them with a space to live, love, care, and fight with each other. By doing this, she took away some of the pressure that women face when they attempt to sustain their same-sex intimacies while living with their own families. By hosting her children in the house where she lived with her husband, Adjì demonstrates that dissident lives are not antithetical to normative life.

In addition to sharing her food and house with others, Adjì's mothering practices revolved around sharing with her children a number of lessons that would enhance their position vis-à-vis their families, and in the challenging nightlife milieu where many of them are often found. Adjì, and many of her children too, occasionally engage in a fight during a night out, or they may be caught with weed, which can lead to confrontation with the police. Adjì's early experience with the police during the "*lesbienne scandal*" of 2013 taught her a lot about police violence and humiliation, and ways to resist those. She recounted how, when she and her four friends who had also been arrested were brought from the police station to the court hearing, they had faced a large crowd of journalists and people curious to witness the trial of the first – exposed – *lesbiennes* in Senegal. She told me proudly how she had held her head up high when facing the crowd, and had showed no fear of the crowd or the verdict. She had been the only one, of the group of five, who had not succumbed to the police violence and humiliation when they tried to get a confession that they were *lesbiennes* from them. This experience gave Adjì legitimacy to teach her children lessons about how to behave and keep their dignity vis-à-vis the police. The ways in which Adjì now teaches her children lessons that she had learned the hard way are exemplary of the transmission of *savoir vivre*.

An example of one of Adjì's children who had learned from Adjì how to stand her ground in challenging encounters with the police and others in nightlife, was Awa. Awa, who was thirty-three years old when I met her in 2021, had previously lived with Adjì intermittently for about three years. She never really left the room that she rented during all these years with her mother and sister, and she has always maintained a good relationship with both of them. She nevertheless spent most of her time with Adjì and Adjì's other children. By staying with Adjì when things got particularly intense on the

relational front, she could shield her mother from that part of her life. Her sister, who is aware of Awa's same-sex relationships, and who knows that she has spent a couple of nights in prison, keeps this information from their mother. Adjì transmitted to her children a *savoir vivre* that eased their way through nightlife. It offered her children the moral, financial, and spatial support that might allow these women just what they need to navigate their relationships with their biological families. Other women, however, have more compromised ties with their families, and being mothered by Adjì may be the best available way to build their lives as *lesbiennes*.

Awa had been scouted in her village, in the region of Fatick along Senegal's west coast, to come and play for an urban women's football team when she was about fourteen years old. Initially, she found it difficult to integrate into the team and the urban milieu, being constantly reminded of and bullied for her lack of style and wit. She was referred to as *kaw-kaw* (W: villager), and to this day she is jokingly referred to by her village of origin. Feeling that she had to prove her worth in her new urban environment, Awa toughened up and developed a habit of fighting back, with words or with deeds, against those who made fun of her. After about ten years of playing club football and making it to the selection of the national women's team, Awa finally had to give up football due to an injury. She decided to move to Dakar in search of work opportunities and, together with her mother, who opened her own small roadside restaurant, and her older sister, the three women rented two rooms in a shared apartment building in one of the popular neighbourhoods of Dakar.

In Dakar, she further integrated into the *kóoba* milieu through her visits to bars and clubs. Integrating into a network of *kóoba* comes through learning and adopting urban *lesbienne* styles such as *jump* (masculine-presenting) or *sexy* (feminine-presenting), attracting girlfriends, and navigating the desires for urban success in *lesbienne* networks with the discretion necessary to avoid being exposed as *lesbiennes* within their own families (Oudenhuijsen 2018). This knowledge circulates unevenly and is not publicly available to anyone. The knowledge of how to dress, learning how to comport oneself as *jump*, *sexy*, or as *kóoba* is learning to become part of a social network of *lesbiennes*.

Awa met Adjì at a *soirée* (F: evening party) that was organised by a *lesbienne* performer. They dated for about a week, until they figured out that they would be better together as friends. Their friendship evolved into a mother-child relationship. When I asked Awa why she considers herself to be one of Adjì's children, she responded "*dafa niit*"<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Nit* means person in Wolof; *nite* or *niit* means having the qualities of a person, which include ideas of lucidity, reason, and wisdom.

(W: she is lucid) and “*dafa jiite ñépp*” (W: she guides everyone).<sup>88</sup> Because Adjì is lucid, wise, and experienced, she is able to advise Awa and her other children on how to navigate difficult situations, such as when being confronted with the police after fighting in a bar.

When I had first met Awa, at the first communion of a mutual friend’s son, she had a fresh scar on her cheek. We were sitting on the rooftop terrace of the friend’s family house with some of their acquaintances. As beers and joints were passed around, Awa’s girlfriend Kenza started telling us how Kenza and Awa had spent the night in jail the day before yesterday. They had fought with men in a bar, after which they had been arrested by the police. “*Il m’a insulté! Je ne pouvais pas le laisser me traiter comme ça!*” (F: He insulted me! I couldn’t just let him treat me like that!), Awa exclaimed in defence of herself. Upon arrest for a minor infraction like fighting in a bar, the police often ask people to pay 12,000 FCFA (about eighteen euros) to be released. Kenza had paid 12,000 FCFA in the morning after having spent the night in jail, but Awa had refused, and she had to stay until seven o’clock in the evening. “*C’est Adjì qui m’a appris à ne jamais payer la police. Tu veux que je passe la nuit au commissariat? Très bien. Je dormirai bien*” (F: It’s Adjì who taught me to never pay the police. You want me to spend the night at the police station? Fine. I’ll sleep well).

The response-ability and responsibility that Haraway (2016) writes about in relation to the making of oddkin, manifest in different ways here. Adjì’s responsibility has become clear from her practices of care. She houses and feeds her children whenever they are in need, and she teaches them to maintain their dignity vis-à-vis the police’s dehumanising practices. As a mother, it is the expectation that Adjì provides materially for her children. Her capacity to host her children, and to feed them, confers upon her the status of mother. In return, Adjì’s children also have a responsibility towards their mother. They are loyal to her, and they often express this by reassuring her status in the social network of *lesbiennes*. As a mother in the *lesbienne* milieu, and as a relatively successful trader who is able to visibly spend money during *lesbienne soirées*, Adjì has achieved a certain status in this environment. She commands respect, but also fear, as she competes with another woman for the position of “best-known” *lesbienne* in the Dakarois *kóoba* milieu. This woman also has a group of children. Some of my interlocutors called these two women’s groups “*clans*” (F: clans) or “*bandes*” (F: gangs), which says something about the dynamics of loyalty, competition, and violence that may occur between these groups. I will not go into detail about the violence that occasionally erupts between these groups, as this is the focus of the next chapter, but what is relevant here is that the loyalty that is expected from Adjì’s children relates to their readiness to defend their mother’s status. This reveals the value of reciprocity that exists in these networks. Where mothers are ready to educate and support younger, or less experienced, *lesbiennes*, they command the support and recognition of their children to acquire a respected status in their social networks.

<sup>88</sup> Conversation with Awa, 21 June 2021.

Adjí's mothering work shows that the transmission of know-how remains crucial in the lives of *lesbiennes* and other *kóoba*. Through the provision of housing, care, and education to other *lesbiennes*, Adjí continues to create and transmit *savoir vivre*. This generates a form of *lesbienne* sociality in which women learn, share, and exchange with one another. This transmission of know-how enables the coming-into-being of new generations of supposedly wicked women. In the introduction, I described the recurring complaints about the moral degeneracy of youth, and particularly of young women. Women's conspicuous consumption and supposed sexual looseness are often blamed for the nation's decline, which is related to the loss of certain so-called traditional Senegalese values. Those who seem to postpone or refuse marriage and/or parenthood, at least in its normative sense, like many *lesbiennes* and *ni génm guddi*, are condemned in discussions about the social fabric and continuity of the Senegalese nation. In the public debate, they are often represented as the embodiment of individualist consumer culture – out for quick money and infected by Western cultures of sexual promiscuity and homosexuality – and they are blamed for putting at risk their family's honour by appearing out-of-line in their appearances and life choices. On the contrary, women like Adjí demonstrate how they do transmit communal values and knowledge to their peers and children. The ways in which Adjí teaches her children how to keep their dignity when they face the police is an example of the transmission of *savoir vivre* and is at the heart of sociality. The knowledge that circulates between Adjí and her children, in addition to the sharing and exchanging of financial resources, physical space, and loose networks of friends, are evidence of the mothering work that is at play in women's oddkin formations. Where anti-queer sentiments and new anti-LGBTIQ law proposals risk shrinking the spaces for dissident practices, the circulation of a *savoir vivre* in kinship bonds become ever more important for people to build and sustain supposedly wicked lives.

## Connecting motherhoods in women's football

The *savoir vivre* to be able to live dissident lives that is learned and created with others also depends on the ability to navigate between oddkin and normative kin bonds. In the domain of women's football, the interactions between these two become visible as some experienced football players partly take over the roles of players' biological parents, while also keeping in touch with them. They refer to themselves as mothers of younger, less experienced players. Their children, these younger players, affectively call their mentors "*maman*" (F: mother). While the stories of parents who are afraid to let their daughters play football because of the supposed lesbianism in women's teams abound, the examples of parents having trusted their daughters to more senior or experienced players and managers are also numerous. Where Adjí teaches her children to assert themselves with dignity in an urban space that is fraught with interpersonal tensions, Fadiga has taken up the work of mothering young players to commit themselves to serious study, and

she maintains relations of mutual respect with the players' biological families. Fadiga's long-standing experience with women's football, first as a player, and later as a manager and activist, has made her suited to taking on the role of a mother. Through this work, she and other football mothers effectively connect *lesbienne* sociality to broader social relations and interactions with family and outsiders to the football milieu.

In Chapter One, we saw how women's attempts to promote and develop women's football centre around collective organising. In addition to initiatives such as the Association des Footballeuses Professionnelles, and Fadiga's role as an organiser of women's competitions and tournaments in the Dakar region, the importance of these women's presence in the football milieu as coaches and team managers includes forms of care and education that take shape through practices of kinship. Football mothers provide some aspects of the education of young players that their biological families cannot, or do not, provide, including conversations about how to form same-sex relationships, how to live through breakups, and how to engage in pleasurable and safe sex. Fadiga convenes a group of about fifteen footballers with whom she meets once a month on Sundays to discuss all sorts of relational matters. They meet in an office space that they have been able to rent via a sexual rights organisation, at the beach, or in another quiet public space where they can talk freely. In between these meetings, the women exchange with each other via WhatsApp. Through her role as a mother for these women, Fadiga provides a space for young women who play football to discuss friendships, education, relationships, sexuality, and gender in terms that their families would not allow.

Not everything that mothers like Fadiga do for their children in football happens outside of the purview of the players' biological families. Mother-daughter relationships are common in women's football because of the difficulties that many young women face in accessing this domain, and in subsequently defending their pursuit of this sports life. If a woman did not benefit from the invitation of a (often male) family member to play football, football mothers can play a role in mediating between the woman and her parents, helping to convince her parents to let their daughter play (Packer 2019). Parents' concerns include the abandonment of studies, as well as the rumours that circulate about women in football who all are, or become, *lesbiennes*. These mother-daughter dynamics in women's football are indicative of a collective response to social stigma, and of the role that oddkin can play to navigate stigma. Packer's (2019, 284) definition of *mamans* (F: mothers) concerns football players who continue to adhere to norms of femininity, in appearance, in their status as wives, or through the gendered roles that they perform at home. Instead of embodying and appropriating the stigma that comes with being a football player, these *mamans* seem to wish to show others outside the sphere of women's football that playing football is not antithetical to being a "good woman." Fadiga and her friend Meta, a thirty-three-year-old former international football player whose



mothering practices I will discuss shortly, do not, however, adhere to norms of femininity to get the trust and respect from the players' families. It is through their practices of care and mentoring of players that they get their families' respect. Their invocation of kinship bonds communicates the responsibility that they take for the young players that they take under their wings. This shows that multiple forms of mothering are possible.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Fadiga's football activism and the walls that she has run up against when attempting to denounce the sexual violence and mismanagement of funds that she encounters in women's football. She has had, I argued, to adjust her engagement in order to be able to make a change for the footballers. One important way that Fadiga achieves this is through her work as a mother for younger players. Fadiga mothers Isseu, a woman about five years younger than herself, whose father has entrusted Fadiga with taking care of his daughter's school and sports results. Isseu's father travels a lot for his work, which makes him unable to check on Isseu's school results or attend parent-teacher meetings at school. Fadiga attends these, and signs anything that has to do with Isseu's school or sports career. When Isseu's football team won the national championship in 2021, and all players received a prime of 200,000 FCFA (about 300 euros), Isseu's father instructed her to give the entire sum to Fadiga, to thank and compensate her for all the work she has done for Isseu. Another one of Fadiga's daughters, Amy, who is about the same age as Isseu, also offered Fadiga part of a sum that she had received at the end of an international tournament she had played with the national team. Fadiga had refused the money, instead advising Amy on how to spend the money: she should first pay her school fees and buy football cleats, and with the rest of the money she should buy a sheep as a way of saving. If her parents were ever in urgent need of money, Fadiga reasoned, they could sell the sheep. Meanwhile, breeding sheep was a good way of increasing savings.<sup>89</sup> While both women are only about five years younger than Fadiga, the difference in experience is what makes Fadiga a mother to them. With her years of experience in women's football, first as a player herself and then as a manager, activist, and mother, Fadiga has the awareness of what is currently lacking in women's football, and she showcases a responsibility towards younger players to enhance their experience in this domain. "*Les filles ont besoin d'éducatrices*" (F: The girls need educators), she said to me. "*Les entraîneurs et les dirigeants ne communiquent pas avec les joueuses. Pour eux, il n'y a que le football qui compte, et en fait, ils s'intéressent surtout pour leurs propres titres et l'argent*" (F: The coaches and managers [men], do not communicate with the players. It's only about football for them, and actually, they are mostly interested in their own titles and money).<sup>90</sup> Filling in the roles that parents and (male) coaches do not perform, Fadiga establishes connections between oddkin and normative kinship bonds. Through her involvement in the players' other social relations and kin networks – following

<sup>89</sup> Conversation with Fadiga, 20 May 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Conversation with Fadiga, 17 May 2021.

her daughters' school results and keeping track of their respect for school and football commitments for example – Fadiga acquires credibility as a person, which is essential in order to be taken seriously in public debates about women's sports, and in the domain of women's football particularly. With this credibility, she opens up pathways for young women like Isseu and Amy to pursue a football career, being at once committed to individual women's abilities to pursue this trajectory while also attempting to advance women's football as a serious practice for women, where their bodies, careers, and life choices are respected.

For women who do have the support of their families to pursue a football career, their success still depends largely on the care of football mothers. Poor training facilities and equipment, and a lack of medical care in case of injury, hamper women's chances to pursue a professional football career. Like Fadiga, Meta has been an assistant manager of a women's team in Dakar. In this role, Meta has taken on the responsibility of helping new players integrate into the team, convincing parents to let their child play, and advising players on combining sports with studies. Because of her proximity to the players, she is well-informed about any problems that arise. In the summer of 2020, Sophie, a player on the team that Meta was also playing for, broke her leg during a practice on their usual sandy and rocky pitch. Sophie had come to Senegal in 2014 from a neighbouring country with her sister, both looking for better work opportunities in and beyond Senegal. When Sophie broke her leg, the team's managers and coaches did not consider it their responsibility to take care of Sophie. Instead, they ignored her requests for financial support, and Meta and others had to take care of her. Because this had occurred during and in between COVID-19 lockdowns, when the football competition had been halted, Sophie had returned home to her parents to recover while being with her family. In January 2022, she returned to Dakar, after the steel pins had got infected. Meta had collected money for the surgery in her vast network of friends, most of whom were football players and supporters. In March 2022, Meta and I visited Sophie when she was in the hospital. As we walked back to the bus together, Meta said that it was through her experience in Morocco that she had learned the importance of community. She had spent some years in Morocco playing for a (semi-) professional football team a decade earlier, where she had experienced great care and support from other, more experienced players and team coaches. In Sophie's case, she realised again how essential such a community of care is, as the football teams and the Football Federation dodge their responsibilities to look after their players. Through the care Meta gives to players like Sophie, she at once reveals what's wrong with women's football in Senegal and re-shapes its practices, providing opportunities for the women she has taken under her wings, on and off the field. The care for women's futures in football and beyond, which Meta and Fadiga show through their work, conveys the values of kinship bonds, motherhood, and the social obligations to share resources.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown a range of modalities of motherhood that so-called wicked women develop as they seek to secure liveable lives. Above all, they demonstrate the importance of strong social ties and collective responses to precarity and gender panic. “*Si tu es pauvre, tu ne peux pas être gouïne. C’est ça ma philosophie*” (F: If you’re poor, you can’t be a dyke. That’s my philosophy),<sup>91</sup> argued Adjì when I asked her, a year after I first met her, how her friends were doing. Financial autonomy, and contributing to the family income, yields social recognition, and gives women more freedom to choose their own paths in life (Aduayi-Diop 2010). But poverty is broader than a lack of money, and it refers to the absence of both economic and social capital. One of the commonly used Wolof words for poverty, *baadoolo*, conveys this simultaneous lack of financial means and social relations to make ends meet. In fact, a combination of economic means, physical appearance, moral values, and social relations determine someone’s social standing (ibid.). In order to be able to make your own life choices, regardless of family expectations and societal norms, you need some degree of financial autonomy. Because this is difficult to obtain for most Senegalese, and certainly for most of my interlocutors, the social dependency on others is high. If you have a strong support network of women who can support you not only financially, but also spatially and socially, then living a dissident life becomes a possibility. Like the previous chapter, this chapter has shown how dependency on others paradoxically brings women freedom.

To understand what networks women create, and how these networks allow for the sustenance of supposedly wicked lives, I asked how so-called wicked women create and transmit *savoir vivre* together in a challenging urban context. Amid sometimes violent exclusion from networks of societal and family support, practices of oddkin and mothering have been crucial for the survival and flourishing of relationships, friendships, and networks among *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi*. Oddkin bonds unfold in places like “the house of *kóoba*” and at the football field, which are important sites where women are initiated and integrate into a network of *lesbiennes*, *ñi génn guddi*, and other *kóoba*. What emerges from the encounters in these places is *savoir vivre*, a know-how to live together in a challenging urban context. Through practices of mothering, women teach each other how to navigate and balance societal expectations and personal desires. The ways in which so-called wicked women share time, resources, and knowledge with each other, does more than just respond to precarity. They are not only stuck with each other, as in being condemned to each other as social outcasts, but they also stick to each other, by showing different practices of care and mentoring that lead to the cultivation of particular forms of sociality. Drawing upon conventional kin lexicon to name their relationships with others, they develop ideas about responsibility, care, and reciprocity

<sup>91</sup> Conversation with Adjì, 12 January 2022.

with each other. Their practices of kinship expand notions of what kinship can be and do, rethinking reproduction by reimagining the people they need around them to transmit their *savoir vivre* to build liveable lives. If, as Serena Dankwa (2023, 171) argues, “we think of mothering as an act of laying the grounds for new lives and future generations,” then these mother-child relationships constitute the foundations from which so-called wicked women develop the *savoir vivre* that is necessary to live their dissident lives in Senegal.

By showing a variety of modalities of motherhood among so-called wicked women, this chapter built on the work of Serawit Debele and the contributors to the 2023 special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* on “Revolutionary Mothering” (Debele 2023a), by arguing how mothering in an unconventional way (i.e. beyond the context of heteronormative marriage) allows women to form close bonds with other dissident women, while simultaneously maintaining relationships, and conforming to responsibilities with normative kin. Moreover, this chapter provides another perspective on the effects of anti-queer sentiments in Senegal, by showing how a context of precarity and vulnerability also leads to particular modes of action that bring women freedom, without ever relieving them of the constraints that they face (Diabate 2020a). This challenges a monolithic representation of gender and sexual dissidents as merely victims, and it questions the opposition between dissidence and normativity that often characterises depictions of gender and sexual dissidence in African societies (Andrikopoulos and Spronk 2023; Hendriks 2021; Miller 2024).

Despite the importance of kinship bonds, these are not free from conflict. These forms of sociality are fragile, affected by the broader societal context that criminalises and stigmatises women’s relationships, and an economic context of scarcity of jobs and resources. The fragility of women’s oddkin bonds is, on the one hand, part of the ambivalence that characterises kinship bonds in general (Geschiere 2013), while also being the result of this scarcity of social recognition and material precarity. Such conflicts are at the heart of the next chapter, in which I analyse a particular form of violence and violent outing, which is called *wacce*, between *lesbiennes*. An analysis of this destructive side of *lesbienne* relations is important for our understanding of women’s agency in Senegal, so it is to this analysis that we now turn.

## CHAPTER 4

**“You trample me,  
I crush you”:  
Humiliation and honour  
in *wàcce* violence**

“*Je leur ai dit que je me suis bagarrée avec elle parce que c’est ma copine. C’est moi qui la baise*” (F: I told them that I fought with her because she’s my girlfriend. It’s me who fucks her), Nabou had told the police when they had arrested her after her girlfriend had reported her, in February 2020.<sup>92</sup> “*Je ne pouvais pas croire qu’elle me fasse ça après avoir été ensemble pendant presque deux ans*” (F: I couldn’t believe that she would do this to me after we had been together for almost two years), she said as she recounted the events to me.<sup>93</sup> Her girlfriend had found out that Nabou had cheated on her, and when she confronted her with this, they had started a fight. Nabou broke her girlfriend’s phone, stole three necklaces, as well as 45,000 FCFA (about 75 euros). Instead of going home after the fight had ended, her girlfriend had gone to the police to report Nabou. When they came to arrest Nabou, she admitted to having fought. She also told them that they were a couple. By doing so, Nabou humiliated her girlfriend. Her declaration not only expressed fearlessness towards the police, knowing very well that this could get her into trouble as well, but it also signalled to her girlfriend that Nabou refused to face the consequences of their break-up on her own. If Nabou was going to prison, so was she. This spin-off to their fight, involving the police in their ending relationship, informs us about a particular dynamic that I encountered with some of my *lesbienne* interlocutors.<sup>94</sup> Nabou had deliberately involved others in her fight with her girlfriend, in an attempt to harm her reputation. In *lesbienne* networks, this is referred to as *wàcce* (W: bringing down).

I have hesitated to write this chapter, because I do not want to perpetuate the (popular) representation in Senegal of *lesbiennes* as vicious youth. Writing about a number of *lesbiennes* who are occasionally violent to each other, and some of whom have made newspaper headlines and have experienced arrest, may, at first sight, appear to do little to balance the prevailing image of them. Although it is a challenge to write about violence when the representation of same-sex sexualities in Senegal is so negative, I think that we should not close our eyes to the destructive side to – some – *lesbienne* networks. Going beyond the level of public discourse and representation, analysing cases of *wàcce* can help us to understand the conditions under which *wàcce* emerges, what it means for dynamics within *lesbienne* networks, and what its consequences are for women’s positions in society. This chapter thus revolves around the following question: *How should we understand the prevalence of wàcce violence between lesbiennes, when women are generally so concerned with keeping their intimate relationships a secret?* Drawing on the stories of a number of women who have either performed *wàcce* or who have been the object of a *wàcce*, I dissect its characteristics: its meanings, intentions, and outcomes, to understand how, paradoxically, *wàcce* is a form of agency for some women in a context in which discretion and secrecy around same-sex relationships are otherwise so important.

<sup>92</sup> All names of interlocutors in this chapter are pseudonyms.

<sup>93</sup> Conversation with Nabou, 18 August 2020.

<sup>94</sup> *Wàcce* occurs among gay men too, but I have not compared their dynamics with those of women, as they are not the focus of my research.

Encountering multiple stories about *wáce* throughout my fieldwork, I learned that the tight-knit networks that are so essential to building *lesbienne* lives amidst economic precarity and rising anti-queer sentiments, can sometimes explode. “Slippages from seduction to aggression,” Tinsley (2010, 56) argues in a book about women’s same-sex eroticism in Caribbean literature, were part of working class women’s same-sex networks where they had little to claim as their own in a colonial, patriarchal society. Violent conflicts over a lover, then, were dramatic expressions of their desire “for at least one prized possession” (ibid., 57). Referring to Tinsley, Dankwa (2021) adds that a “collectivization of love” is at play in women’s same-sex relationships in Ghana, whereby women mediate their friends’ relationships and exchange girlfriends between themselves. Such tight-knit networks, in which women share everything – from scarce economic resources, to housing, as well as lovers – inevitably occasionally leads to jealousy and (violent) arguments, with women envious to keep and possess the little that is available to them. *Wáce* thus engages a paradox: women need each other’s care and support to be able to live their dissident lives, yet they also compete over the scarce resources that are available to them.

I draw upon literature on agency to tackle the question of why women would engage in *wáce* and, in doing so, expose themselves and others, when secrecy around one’s same-sex intimacies is so important. Lila Abu-Lughod has drawn our attention to the fact that agency cannot always be equated to resistance, and that among feminists there is a tendency to romanticise resistance, blinding us to other forms of agency and meaning-making within norms and structures (Abu-Lughod 1990). Mahmood (2001, 203) argues for an understanding of agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.” Agency and structures co-produce each other, and therefore an analysis of women’s agency in *wáce* needs to be accompanied by an exploration of the structures in which women live (Van Dijk, De Bruijn, and Gewald 2007). “There is no agency outside of restrictions,” (Diabate 2020a, 19); instead, agency is relational, co-constituted in interactions between people, and dependent on changing positions of power and vulnerability. In *Naked agency: Genital cursing and biopolitics in Africa*, Naminata Diabate (2020a) zooms in on historical and contemporary examples of women’s naked protests in Africa and its diaspora to argue that genital cursing and women disrobing in protest against political powers and institutions were a last resort for women who had no other, formal, means of addressing power. Building upon the work of these scholars, and particularly inspired by Diabate’s work on naked agency, I understand *wáce* as a particular form of agency that emerges from a position of vulnerability. This approach to agency as emerging from positions of vulnerability helps me to make sense of what, at first sight, seems a senseless exercise that only worsens women’s already precarious situation, and it provides insight into the new inequalities and social hierarchies that are created through the practice.

## What is *wàcce*?

*Wàcce* literally means “bringing down.” J.L. Diouf’s (2003) Wolof-French dictionary gives a literal use of *wàcce* in the sense of getting your luggage off the bus. Whenever I asked people outside of networks of *lesbiennes*, *gays*, and *ñi génn guddi* about the meaning of *wàcce*, they seemed puzzled.<sup>95</sup> *Wàcc/wàcce* is a Wolof word, but its everyday use does not extend far beyond: “*wàcc naa liggéey*” (W: I got off from work) or “*chauffeur, may ma wàcc*” (F/W: driver, allow me to get off [the bus/car]). There is a proverbial use of the word beyond this everyday context: when attending a festive ceremony such as a wedding or a baptism, a *géwël* (W: griot, praise singer) can comment on a guest’s dazzling appearance with: “*danga wàcc koñ bi*” (W: you have brought down the neighbourhood). It conveys that the others look pale next to you. It is this figurative sense that provides insight into the meanings of *wàcce* violence, as both forms of *wàcce* are related to people’s positioning in their social networks, and to the status that they command from outperforming others. Used primarily as a verb – and to a lesser extent also as a noun when people narrate an event of *wàcce* – it signals the agency of the people who perform and experience it.

The practice of exposing, often violently, a lover who has left you or someone who has humiliated your status, deliberately involves the neighbourhood or the family of the person under attack. It is a form of violence that is particular to some *lesbienne* and *gay* networks in Senegal. I have to stress *some*, because *sutura* remains crucial for most people to navigate their sexually dissident lives. Furthermore, most people have an aversion to violence and they attempt stay away from people who resort to it. Particularly men and women from higher social standing, for whom reputation damage is more imminent, stay far away from *wàcce* practices and the networks in which this occurs. There is, additionally, a youthfulness to the people who engage in *wàcce*. The women I met and heard about as doing *wàcce* were all relatively young, unmarried women (except for Adjì, who was a young, divorced woman) who were still looking to position themselves in their social worlds, and they did not yet carry the responsibility of their own families and a (stable) job. For some young women and men living in precarious conditions, *wàcce* may be the only option that they see to claim a position in their social worlds.

A position of vulnerability does not always lead to violent means of expression like *wàcce*. Some people may, despite their vulnerability, see other options for claiming a position in society. In the context of prolonged economic crisis in Senegal, Mamadou Diouf (2002) has argued that some men in urban Senegal have turned to becoming rap artists and wrestlers, drawing upon their bodies to claim a presence and existence in the public sphere. For women, especially young and unmarried women, to claim a position

<sup>95</sup> Because of their proximity to *lesbiennes* and *gays* in the milieu of nightlife, *ñi génn guddi* were often aware of dynamics of *wàcce* occurring among some *lesbienne* networks.



in the public sphere is more complicated, as they are policed for their behaviour more than any other social group. The *lesbienne* milieu is not the only place where violence and humiliation occur of course. *Ni génn guddi* have also told me stories of verbal and physical violence that they encounter in the night, where defining moral hierarchies is also an important part of the tensions between women. Women explained to me how “*Guddi am na boroom*” (W: The night it has its masters), to say that witches and evil spirits (W: *jinn*) dominate in the milieu of those who go out at night, making women do evil things to hinder others in their work by making them physically sick or by taking away their clientele. Such reference aside, I have not looked into dynamics of violence among *ni génn guddi*. What gives extra weight to violent behaviour in *lesbienne* networks, compared to other groups, is the presence of media and a public that are hungry for “scandals,” and a public debate that pays excessive attention to the alleged vices of young *gays* and *lesbiennes* and their sexuality. Confronting these risks when you perform a *wáce* might appear to be a stupidity for some, but it is a sign of strength for others. Particularly in a time of growing anti-queer sentiments, outing others – and by implication, yourself too – seems illogical, and arguably even has a negative effect on your own reputation. It is this context of anti-queerness, however, that makes acts of *wáce* powerful. *Wáce* is a response to the representation of same-sex sexualities in society: it can only be so effective because the threat of social ostracism and becoming the talk of the town is real.

Women who *wáce* another woman draw the attention of their family or neighbourhood to the immoral behaviour of the other woman. They *wáce kër ga* (W: bring down the house) or *wáce koñ bi* (W: bring down the neighbourhood). The intention is to draw the attention of the direct environment to harm the other’s reputation by shaming them for offending particular morals. This makes *wáce* highly embedded in broader social relations. In a premeditated form, *wáce* is a performance, with an audience being drawn into the conflict in an attempt to gain something out of it. It can also, however, be an impulsive emotional response when someone feels their dignity is threatened. When *wáce* follows a break-up between lovers, the violence may not be directed only at the person who broke the bond, but it might also involve their family because, to some extent, they are held responsible for the discontinuation of the relationship. The pressure of heterosexual marriage is so strong for many women that it makes sustaining *lesbienne* lives difficult. When a woman leaves her female lover to marry a man, the frustration that that woman may feel as a result of being put aside, can lead to *wáce*. In 2019, several newspapers reported the verdict of a woman who had attempted to set fire to the house of her female lover. She was convicted to one year in prison for “*actes contre nature*” (F: unnatural acts, i.e. same-sex conduct) and “*destruction de bien d’autrui*” (F: the destruction of property). I discussed this case of *wáce* with Nafissatou, who knew the woman and had spoken to her after the event. She told me that the woman had felt betrayed, as she had been providing for her lover and her lover’s mother financially. When her lover decided to

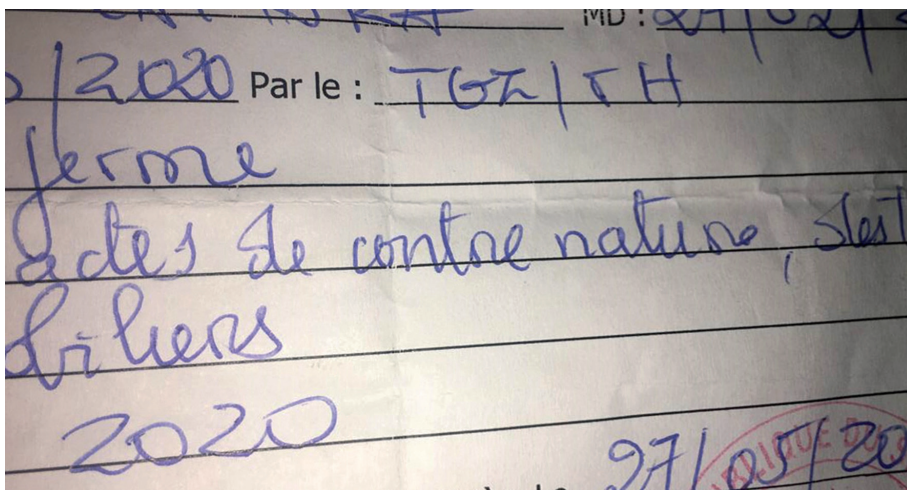
get back with her (ex-)husband, her lover may have interpreted this as, as a woman, she would never really be acknowledged as the provider for her girlfriend. She was painfully reminded that their relationship was never meant to last. To *wâcce* the house of her lover, then, was perhaps a way to protest this impossibility and an expression of the feeling of powerlessness that this gave her.

To *wâcce* a woman who you feel has wronged you, for example by leaving you to marry a man, as in this case, is to expose her moral wrongdoing to others. To *wâcce* someone is to bring her down from a state of moral virtue, by showing the environment that she, too, despite a pretence of success, is a *lesbienne*. Women sometimes talked about it as “*wâcce ba zero*” (W/F: bringing down to zero), to signal that someone had been destroyed to the ground. Perhaps more boastful than truthful, it nevertheless indicates a wish to make someone really feel the consequences of *wâcce*. This echoes George Meiu’s (2020, 577) description of “intimate exposures, performative attempts to unmask signs of social failure hidden beneath appearances of respectability, to peel off – in speech or deed – an outer, visible stratum (e.g. clothing) of bodies and relations and bring to light their troubled underlayers.” Like intimate exposures, we might understand *wâcce* as a complaint against a culture of appearance, or what women often phrased as “hypocrisy.” Intimate exposures, and women exposing someone else’s “hypocrisy,” are about showing that someone is not better than you (we’re all *lesbiennes*). Refusing to be humiliated by others’ pretenses of success and sociability, women stage conflicts as “ways of negotiating multiple marginalisation and becoming-relevant as movements towards mattering and visibility” (Henriksen and Miller 2012, 454). By shaming others, they attempt to turn the tables and become visible in a brighter light themselves.

### **“*Lesbienne* scandals” and the consequences of *wâcce***

By telling the police that the fight Nabou and her (unsurprisingly, now her ex-) girlfriend had engaged in had been one between lovers, Nabou had thus exposed her girlfriend as a *lesbienne* to get her into trouble. The case was taken to court, and both of them were convicted to one month in prison for fighting. Nabou was convicted for another two months for theft. During the court hearing where the verdict was pronounced, which I attended, the judge made no mention of their relationship. The note given to Nabou upon her release from prison, however, mentioned “*actes contre nature*” as one of the reasons for her conviction.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Part of the note that she had sent to me. I have cropped it to erase the details that could possibly identify the case, the judge, and Nabou’s identity.



Part of the release papers Nabou received. Photo: Loes Oudenhuijsen.

The law that criminalises same-sex conduct is applied in obscure ways. With often no evidence of the occurrence of same-sex acts, judges present other things, such as the presence of condoms and lubricants in an apartment, as “proof” of the occurrence same-sex acts (Human Rights Watch 2015). While such “evidence” is irrelevant in the case of women, women have, albeit more rarely than men, been put on trial for supposedly *lesbienne* behaviour (ibid.). When I spoke to a judge to try and find out what had happened around Nabou’s conviction, he argued that women are never convicted for same-sex acts because their sex is not considered real sex, as it does not involve penile-vaginal intercourse.<sup>97</sup> Nabou’s release papers suggest a different opinion when she was judged.

While Nabou’s declaration of her fight as a passionate one between lovers was intended to hurt her girlfriend, she did not come away unscathed herself. “*Wallahi sur la tête de ma mère, je suis une prisonnière. C’est comme en prison ici. Je ne sors pas. Tout le monde parle de moi*” (F: I swear to my mother’s head, I’m a prisoner. It’s like prison here. I don’t leave the house. Everyone talks about me), she said when I visited her in August 2020, a couple of months after her release from prison.<sup>98</sup> At the time, she was staying with her great-aunt in a very quiet house, around the corner from her aunt’s house. Her aunt, her mother’s sister, was the only family member who was currently on speaking terms with Nabou. She had offered Nabou this place to stay after Nabou’s parents refused to talk to her since her arrest. Nabou and I had met at a party two weeks earlier, and she explained that this had been the first time she had gone out since her release from prison. News about her arrest had spread in the town she lives in, which is small enough for people to recognise her in the few bars and clubs in the town centre. She avoided town for a while,

<sup>97</sup> Interview with judge, 4 September 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Conversation with Nabou, 18 August 2020.

hoping for people's attention to shift to the next "scandal." She was already known to be rather aggressive and to engage in street fights with others. Because of her fearlessness, she might not have foreseen how far the effects of her declaration would reach this time. Not only did people on the street look down upon her – something she had grown rather used to as a big, masculine-looking woman with long dreadlocks and tattoos – but her entire family (except for this one aunt) had stopped talking to her, and even her *lesbienne* network seemed to believe that she had gone too far this time, and they largely avoided her. She felt lonely: "*Ci samay jafe-jafe dama wéet. Kenn mēnul comprendre li ma dund*" (W: I am lonely with my problems. No one can understand what I am going through). A couple of weeks later, she decided to break her solitude by talking to a journalist from one of the most widely read newspapers in the country. In a full-page interview, she hinted at her violence as a form of protest, arguing that many *gays* and *lesbiennes* are "rebels" who have had a hard time in their families, and who, as a result, have decided to revolt against the lack of consideration they experienced.<sup>99</sup> With this interview, Nabou turned the blame back onto those who have stigmatised her and other *lesbiennes* and *gays* for disregarding morality. Instead, she argued that the lack of education and attention on the part of parents and educators may be at the root of the problems that occur among *lesbienne* youth today.

*It's a Saturday morning in October 2020. As I walk home from an appointment at the medical clinic for a friend, I receive a phone call from Mariama. "Tu as vu le journal aujourd'hui?" (F: have you seen the newspaper today?), she asks. Which one? I respond. "[name of newspaper.] Mon amie vient de m'appeler pour m'informer. Nabou a pété un câble. Un entretien de tout un page Loes, et avec sa photo! Elle parle du fait d'être lesbienne. Je n'ai pas encore vu le journal, mais je te jure, c'est grave" (F: My friend just called me to inform me. Nabou has lost her mind. A full-page interview Loes, with her photo! She talks about being a lesbienne. I haven't seen the newspaper yet, but I'm telling you, this is bad). I tell Mariama that I will quickly buy one and send her the interview. She is in a village where she does not have immediate access to the newspaper. I rush to the boutique and immediately see the article announced on the front page. I quickly take a photo of the front page and the interview, and send it to Mariama. Two blue check marks tell me that she has immediately read my message. She calls me again. "Loes, elle est folle ou quoi? Cette fille me fait peur... non sérieux, dafa wacce réew mi! J'ai peur Loes, j'ai peur qu'elle ait secrètement pris des photos lors de notre mariage. Si elle veut vraiment nous exposer, elle pourrait les publier, et on serait foutus" (F/W: Loes, is she crazy or what? This girl scares me... no seriously, she has brought down the country. I am scared Loes, I am scared that she has secretly taken photos at our wedding [the wedding of Yacine and Mariama that I*

<sup>99</sup> I am paraphrasing here to avoid the reader's ability to look up the article on the internet and find Nabou's real identity.

*described in chapter two). If she is really after exposing us all, she could publish them, and we would be screwed). I try to calm Mariama by saying that Nabou does not have photos of the wedding. After all, Nafissatou had asked everyone to hand in their phones before the start of the event, precisely to prevent photos or videos to be taken that could accidentally, or purposefully, end up in the wrong hands. “Mais elle était avec son telephone à un moment donné, Loes” (F: But she had her phone at some point, Loes), Mariama continued. I understood her fear, and I started to feel it too. It would not be the first same-sex wedding that would lead to a media “scandal” in the country and result in the imprisonment of some, and the flight of others.*

In the interview, Nabou explained that she had become a *lesbienne* in her sports team. She explained having been lured into “lesbianism” by girls who had offered her a lot of money. Furthermore, her involvement in same-sex practices was, she argued, the result of the neglect she experienced from her family. She perfectly played into existing stereotypes about “lesbianism” as occurring primarily in sports teams, and about “homosexuality” in general as being a cult that youngsters are lured into with money. Moreover, the supposed neglect of her family aligned with anti-queer discourse that suggests that a narrow focus on *gay* men in anti-queer sentiments had led to a “lesbianisation” of society. The interview was a continuation of Nabou’s *wâce* but her target had changed from her ex-girlfriend to all other *lesbiennes*. Feeling abandoned by her *lesbienne* network, she might have played with the idea of dragging more women into her misery by threatening to expose them.

*Wâce* can play out at different scale levels. At this level of “bringing down the country,” Nabou was playing into the strong anti-queer sentiments in society by speaking the unspeakable about the supposed increase of *lesbiennes* in the sports milieu, hereby exposing an entire group. In this sense, this was different from the typical interpersonal *wâce*, where women seek to humiliate one particular person in an attempt to restore their own dignity. Nevertheless, the general exposure of Nabou’s embeddedness in *lesbienne* networks, could potentially lead to consequences for individuals, if Nabou was tempted to divulge more about her relations. This is what Mariama was afraid of. When I called Nabou upon Mariama’s request, Nabou shared that she was indeed considering talking to other journalists, who had already started contacting her after the initial publication, eager to milk this story.

She concluded the interview by stating that she wanted to quit the *lesbienne* way of life, and that she was praying to God that she would find a husband and have children with him. A couple of months later, when I was staying with Nafissatou, both Nafissatou and I received messages from Nabou asking for help to apply for asylum for persecution based on sexual orientation. Nafissatou suggested that Nabou had tried to create such problems for herself in Senegal precisely so that she could prove that it was no longer

safe for her in Senegal. Whether Nabou had premeditated her flight from Senegal when she decided to give the interview I do not know, but the interview had surely had more unintended, negative consequences on her situation in Senegal. Having lost her network, she had few people to count on for support in finding a job or setting up a small business. She left for Morocco, perhaps temporarily, to find new opportunities elsewhere.

In this case, Nabou had approached journalists herself for an interview. She probably had quick success given the country's extensive tabloid press that is eager to exploit and exaggerate such cases for commercial gain. What was shocking about this interview, is that Nabou admitted publicly that she had engaged in *lesbienne* practices, a disclosure that is unspeakable in Senegal. The article fit, however, in a series of "*lesbienne* scandals" that have been published over the past couple of years, some of which have been instigated by *lesbiennes* themselves.

In April 2020, a "scandal" was reported in various Senegalese media outlets. Via two anonymous Instagram pages, videos and photos of a number of women had been posted. According to my interlocutors, these pages had been created from the United States, where a friend of the woman who intended to *wacce* her ex-girlfriend lived. They had allegedly been created specifically for the occasion, to be able to disseminate the photos and videos of these young women anonymously. Both pages had a very small number of followers, but it had been enough to get the images to circulate widely. As a result of the exposure of these photos, some women went into hiding for a while, as they waited for the situation to calm down. The dissemination was rather successful: a day or two after the publication of the photos, I received them from several of my interlocutors. While in the initial days following the "scandal" my interlocutors were still unsure about who exactly had published the photos, they all agreed on the fact that it had been an act of revenge.

As people tried to find out what had happened, I learned that it was about a woman who had taken revenge on her ex-girlfriend for leaving her. Her ex-girlfriend had supposedly got involved with another woman while she (the one who had commissioned the publication of the videos and photos) had been imprisoned for theft. When she was released from prison, and had found out about her girlfriend's new lover, she had entered a WhatsApp group with *lesbiennes* on her ex-girlfriend's phone, and she had taken photos and videos from the group to publish them online.<sup>100</sup> Instagram pages were created to publish the photos anonymously. The women who were exposed through her act had quickly found out who had published them, however, and the story about the woman's prison sentence further spread and it reached me too, despite the fact that I

<sup>100</sup> There are many WhatsApp groups, some with dozens of members, in which *lesbiennes* exchange info, gossip, and photos of girlfriends and women looking for a girlfriend. I was repeatedly warned by interlocutors that such groups are dangerous, because people with bad intentions can easily enter such a group and take the – sometimes rather sexually explicit – photos and videos and divulge them.

knew neither her nor any of the women involved. Because I do not know the woman in question personally, I will not speculate further about the exact intention of her act. Like in the previous example of *wacce*, however, we may wonder why someone would commit such an act and simultaneously put herself in danger of being outed. Hawa could not believe it had happened: “*Je ne sais pas comment quelqu’une peut être aussi bête, stupide et méchante. Elle se vengera. Celle qui a fait ça, l’autre se vengera, c’est sûr. Que l’on se prépare au pire*” (F: I do not know how someone can be such a dumb, stupid, and mean idiot. She will take revenge. The one who did this, the other one will take revenge, that is certain. That we prepare for the worst).<sup>101</sup> Fortunately, it did not lead to another “scandal,” and Senegalese media soon lost their interest in the case.

In the days following the initial publication, two articles appeared in which two of the women whose photo had been published argued that their photo had accidentally found its way to this publication, and that they themselves are not *lesbiennes*. One was a married woman and mother of two children, and the other was a football player. These two women sought to restore their reputation by trying to argue that they are not *lesbiennes*. These publications draw attention to the serious consequences that such media “scandals” can have for people. For the football player, the article was not enough to solve the problems she had with her parents since the event. In August, about four months after the publication, I came across the woman’s photo in a WhatsApp status update of a friend. The woman had got married that day, and my friend had attended the wedding. Fadiga, who was also her friend, had not been able to attend the wedding but she had spoken to her a couple of days prior to the event. Not having been able to return home after the end of the football season, the only way she knew how to resolve the problem was to get married. In addition to affecting the lives of individual women, the “scandal” risked reinforcing negative stereotypes about women footballers being (indiscreet) *lesbiennes*. To counter accusations of “lesbianism,” which also came from one of the coaches on the team, several women had distanced themselves from the woman who had appeared in the “scandal,” arguing that they were not like this. These women had to do a lot of work to restore relationships with their families, in their sports teams, and in other networks. Sometimes, big sacrifices have to be made to appease one’s family, which may include getting married. The consequences of *wacce* can be long-lasting.

Although *wacce* as a practice of violence is specific to some *lesbienne* networks, the Senegalese media sensationally cover instances of violence between co-wives in polygynous marriages too. Newspapers regularly report on cases of women who have attacked their co-wives physically, sometimes using knives, petrol, or other utensils (Seneweb 2018, 2022, 2023).

<sup>101</sup> WhatsApp conversation with Hawa, 23 April 2020.



The media write about it sensationally, and people often explain such cases as exaggerated jealousy from the woman, but one could argue that this articulates their protest against the societal norm and law that enable, and even encourage, polygyny for men. By attacking a co-wife, they protest polygyny and the unequal treatment of the different wives in their union. Women's resistance to the challenges of living in polygynous marriages are part of Wolof traditions: in the ritual of *xaxar* (W: to insult someone, to air their dirty laundry), in which co-wives engaged in verbal fights during a wedding ceremony, women were allowed to express their anxieties and frustrations about having to share their husband with another woman (Gueye 2010a). Gueye argues that although the ceremony is gradually disappearing, the *xaxar* that are still organised have become increasingly serious, and they often lead to physical fights between the women. *Xaxar* songs are a space for women to criticise the arrival of a co-wife, a situation that they often have not had any say in. The fact that in *xaxar* the attack is directed at the co-wife, and not the husband who decided to marry another wife, reveals how society pits women against each other (ibid.). Similarly, in media portrayals of violent conflicts between co-wives, where the focus is on women's interpersonal violence and their supposed hot-headedness, the role of husbands and their families are wilfully ignored. Women fighting among themselves, whether they are *lesbiennes* fighting and destroying each other's property or co-wives in polygamous marriages attacking each other or sabotaging the other wife's work, suits heteropatriarchal power: women's so-called wickedness is purportedly proven by their aggression and, in the case of *lesbiennes* specifically, their moral degeneracy seems apparent from their indecent behaviour. This representation of *lesbiennes* is perpetuated through the material and discursive power of media, as well as of political and religious authorities with an interest to "confirm" that same-sex desiring persons are a threat to the moral stability of the nation.

A recent striking example of the role of politics in the negative representation of *lesbiennes* and other gender and sexual dissidents, is the law proposal that was submitted in December 2021. A collective of religious organisations called *Ànd Samm Jikko Ji* (W: Together for the preservation of our values), together with a number of parliamentarians, submitted a proposal to the government in 2021, in an attempt to further criminalise dissident genders and sexualities. They argued that the current law that criminalises "acts against nature" is too vague and too lenient vis-à-vis the supposed growth in LGBTQI+ identities. The definitions of the different elements in the LGBTQI+ acronym that they listed in the proposal are remarkable. Their definition of *lesbiennes* was as follows: "*Désigne une attirance sentimentale et sexuelle entre deux ou plusieurs femmes, c'est pratiquement l'homosexualité féminine*" (F: Refers to a sentimental and sexual attraction between two or more women, it is practically female homosexuality). Both "sentimental and sexual attraction" and "Between two or more women" attracted my attention. When the media report about *gay* men they use different wording: the definition of *gay* did not include "sentimental



attraction,” nor did it explicitly mention the possibility of multiple men being involved. The definition of gay read: “C’est l’homosexualité masculine, l’attirance amoureuse et sexuelle entre les hommes” (F: It’s male homosexuality, the romantic and sexual attraction between men).



ASSEMBLEE NATIONALE XIII<sup>e</sup> Législature

**Proposition de loi n°..... / 2021**  
**Modifiant l'article 319 alinéa 3 du Code Pénal**  
**régi par la loi 66-16 du 1<sup>er</sup> février 1966,**  
**instituant la criminalisation de lesbienne,**  
**gay, bisexuel et transgenre – LGBT+.**

**COMPOSITION DU DOSSIER**

1. Exposé des motifs
2. Proposition de loi

valeurs que nous sommes. Il prend des proportions inquiétantes et dangereuses et se manifeste sous le sigle LGBT+ ainsi définies:

- Lesbienne : désigne une attirance sentimentale et sexuelles entre deux ou plusieurs femmes, c'est pratiquement l'homosexualité féminine.
- Gay : c'est l'homosexualité masculine, l'attirance amoureuse et sexuelle entre les hommes.
- Bisexuel : le fait d'avoir des relations amoureuses et sexuelles aussi bien pour les personnes du même genre que celle du sexe opposé.
- Transgenre : se dit d'une personne dont l'identité de genre n'est pas en accord avec le sexe biologique assigné à la naissance.
- Queers (en anglais) signifiant pédés en français : c'est un autre terme pour désigner la relation amoureuse entre des hommes (homosexualité)
- Intersexualité : le fait d'être adepte de toute orgie sexuelle imaginable
- Nécrophilie ou nécrolagnie : c'est une attirance sexuelle d'un humain pour les cadavres. Ils sont appelés nécrophiles.
- Zoophilie: l'attirance sexuelle d'un être humain pour des animaux. Ils sont appelés zoophiles.

Toutes ces pratiques découlant de cette nébuleuse LGBT+ montrent encore le niveau de perversion des mœurs et de déviance sexuelle des personnes dans la seule satisfaction des caprices immoraux, des mondanités et des voluptés.

Part of the text of the final draft of the proposal for a new law as it was sent to Parliament in December 2021.

Although I cannot say for certain that the authors of the text consciously and purposefully made this distinction in the definition of *gay* and *lesbienne*, I am nevertheless inclined to see the definition of *lesbienne* in the proposed legal text as an expression of the fear that *lesbiennes* are women who conspire against men in groups. The authors' definition of intersexuality as “*adepte à toute orgie imaginable*” (F: adept at every imaginable orgy) also sounds ludicrous, but is probably a deliberate attempt to demonise intersexuality as a hypersexual practice.<sup>102</sup> The way in which *lesbiennes* are described in the proposal fits with the media representation of them. In the media, “scandals” often report about the activities of a “*bande de lesbiennes*” (F: gang of *lesbiennes*). Such appellations are not generally used to classify groups of *gay* men. When women group together, they escape patriarchal control and supposedly engage in the destructive practices of criminality, prostitution, or lesbianism. The supposedly sentimental nature of *lesbienne* attraction that the proposal speaks of becomes visible in the way in which mediatised “scandals” about *lesbiennes* often refer to violent fights among women. The equation of lesbianism to violence is not unique to Senegal: Lynda Hart (1994) demonstrated how the representation of lesbians as criminal deviants in popular culture of the West in the 1990s has its origins in the historical conflation of sexual and criminal deviancy in nineteenth-century Europe.

<sup>102</sup> The representation of LGBTQI+ sexualities as vulgar, even bestial, was further achieved through the definition of the “+” in LGBTQI+. Although the “+” is generally meant to be inclusive of any non-normative gender or sexual identities not captured in LGBTQI, the authors of this proposed legal text took another turn by adding zoophilia and necrophilia to the list of sexual identities that they explicitly sought to criminalise.

The looming fear of *wàcce* keeps many women at a distance from *lesbienne* networks, which was also reflected in Yacine's quote in Chapter Two, in which she explained that she had decided to stay away from sexual rights organisations until her own wedding, because, according to her, there were always people who entered such organisations just to get information in order to expose people. It was not uncommon for me to hear interlocutors complain about the behaviour of women in *lesbienne* networks. Interlocutors sometimes likened the behaviour of women who did *wàcce* to the behaviour of women footballers, whom some also considered to expose themselves too much, with their masculine appearance. Whether there is indeed more violence between *lesbienne* women than among other sections of the population is impossible to verify, and it is not the question that interests me here. For sure, cases of violence in *lesbienne* networks are exposed in the media, who gladly blow up stories to scandalous proportions for commercial success. What sells better, in a time of heightened anti-queer sentiments, than stories that seem to confirm the claim that *lesbiennes* and *gays* are vulgar persons without respect for any norm of decency or for the cultural importance of *sutura*? The responsibility of the press is thus enormous, but leaks to the press do occur, and they can come from within *lesbienne* networks. The combination of virulent anti-queer sentiments and the existence of a large scandal press makes such leaks to the media an effective element in *wàcce*, particularly when there are no voices in the public domain that can counter such representation of same-sex sexualities. To understand why some women do occasionally resort to violence in such a context, I now turn to a discussion of their social positioning.

### ***Wàcce* as naked agency**

With the newspaper with Nabou's interview in my hand, I walked to Ndeye's. We discussed the article – Ndeye knows Nabou – and the practice of *wàcce* more generally. She said:

*C'est seulement dans le milieu, les kóoba, qui font ça. Souvent les filles qui font le wàcce, sont des filles qui se foutent de ce que les gens disent d'elles. Peut-être sa copine vit en cachet, mais les gens savent déjà ce qu'elle vit. Elles ont eu des problèmes, donc elles se foutent des gens* (F: It's only in this environment, the *kóoba*, who do this. Often, the girls who practice *wàcce* are girls who do not care about what other people say about them. Their girlfriend may live secretly [her same-sex intimacies], but people already know what she lives. They have already had problems, so they do not care).<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Conversation with Ndeye, 4 October 2020.

In other words, Nabou had little to lose; indeed, women practicing *wáce* generally have little to lose, and both social and economic factors help explain why someone might be drawn to violence. Many women who perform *wáce* have grown up in poverty and have experienced little choices with respect to their future, both in terms of securing a job, and often also with regards to the pressure to marry. Furthermore, many have already had problems with their families because of their sexual dissidence. Violence is part of many of my interlocutors' lives, many of whom have experienced different forms of violence at home, in school, or in their everyday urban environments. Whether it is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, or symbolic violence, its ordinariness informs how women may look at violence and normalise it. In nightlife, sometimes as a result of substance abuse, violence is even more prevalent than elsewhere. Against the background of structural violence that many poor urban *lesbiennes* face, violence may become a last resort when one feels humiliated in all spheres of life (Groes-Green 2009; Katz 1988). Violence may help in transforming feelings of victimhood and humiliation into power, by temporarily dominating someone by subjecting her to your violence, and damaging her reputation, so that she will bear the consequences of her decision to leave you. *Wáce* can become a familiar reaction for women who are not afraid of the consequences for their reputation. If there is nothing left to lose, someone can hardly take revenge on you, and even the possible consequence of imprisonment may not be terrifying enough to withhold someone like Nabou from doing *wáce*.

This brings me back to Naminata Diabate's (2020a) concept of naked agency. Tracing a long history of genital cursing and women disrobing in protest against political powers and in Africa, she argues that genital cursing foregrounds the agentive possibilities that arise from positions of vulnerability and precarity. In her discussion of women's naked protests, Diabate argues how, for these, women their bodies were the only weapon they had. They proved to be a powerful weapon because of the cultural meaning that is attached to the exposure of female genitalia in some societies. One of the cases in Diabate's book is the historical Women's War of 1929, in which thousands of Igbo and Ibibio women performed a collective genital shaming gesture, showing their naked buttocks to horrified soldiers and British colonial administrators, in a protest against female taxation and the colonial incursion in Igboland. Rather than accepting symbolic interpretations of genital cursing as emanating from women's bodies' supposedly innate mystical powers, Diabate urges us to take a closer look at the dialectical movement between positions of victimhood and power. She suggests that dire material conditions and the lack of options weighed more heavily in women's decision to disrobe than their belief in the mystical power of their naked bodies.

The concept of naked agency must be understood figuratively as much as literally, as the vulnerability and precarity drove women's decisions to strip naked. Stripping naked

was a last resort to draw the attention of those in power. The figurative nakedness of women's agency also lies in the open-endedness of their actions, or "open strategies" as Diabate (2020a, 17) calls them, with complex and unstable outcomes. The women's protests were successful in that the British colonial authorities agreed not to tax women. The British continued taxation of men, however, and their control of market prices continued to influence women's economic opportunities. Furthermore, despite some political changes instigated by the Women's War, women remained excluded from most political processes (Falola and Paddock 2011). It is this exclusion from political processes that explained women's resort to violence, in the absence of institutionalised access to power to affect change. Their agency was informed by a very restricted context.

Although women who perform *wacce* do not directly attack political institutions, the ways in which they resort to a form of violence with the potential to hurt others who are in a (slightly) better position, resembles Diabate's analysis of naked agency. For women who perform *wacce*, physically and verbally humiliating another *lesbienne* to strip her of her *sutura* is the only power they have over others. *Wacce* is a constant negotiation of power relations between the women and their targets, and the outcome of women's intentions – however intentional their acts may be – can never be presupposed. With the media's hunger for "scandals" and rising anti-queer sentiments, the potential consequences can be far-reaching, and they expand beyond women's direct environment. "Agency is always co-constitutive, because the agency of the women stops or slows down where that of their targets begins or speeds up" (Diabate 2020a, 37). It does not suffice to look at women's intentions only, and exploring other people's interpretations of the acts, whether they are bystanders, those under attack, police officers, or family, is equally important for an understanding of the effects of *wacce* on women's positioning in society.

Women's naked protest, either to shame individuals who offended community morality or to oppose a (colonial) government's injustices, have many precedents in a variety of African societies. Dating back to precolonial societies, naked protests have also been deployed by women to shame individuals or groups who broke society's morals. In northwest Cameroon, among the Kom, *anlu* was a practice whereby groups of women performed rituals to shame and ostracise individuals who broke community morals, and particularly those who offended womanhood (Nkwi 1985). *Anlu* produced a temporary reversal of the normal order of things, as transgressive practices such as showing one's sexual organs, or using someone's compound as a public latrine, were momentarily sanctioned in order to show the gravity of the infraction. Shouting obscenities was an important part of *anlu*, and it is also a part of *wacce*, as I will show with another case shortly. Although *wacce* is not naked protest in a literal sense, the objective of shaming someone who has offended morality, is what *wacce* has in common with a practice like *anlu*. Both practices constitute momentary transgressions of civility that are intended to

draw attention to those individuals who are breaking society's moral values. In a context in which maintaining the privacy and honour of oneself and of others is so important, the emotional and violent outburst that come with *wàcce* can be considered a form of naked agency.

Literal nudity continues to be deployed against governments to protest injustices. Stella Nyanzi's naked protest in 2016, protesting Makerere University's move to lock her out of her office after a dispute she had with the management, and in 2019 during a court hearing when she was sentenced to eighteen months in prison for cyber harassment after she had insulted the president in a poem that she published online, are some of the most recent examples. About her decision to use nakedness as a form of protest, Nyanzi has said:

If you're living in a country where democracy died many years ago, the legal system does not have fairness, you have been pushed to the wall, and you feel you are being humiliated, what can you do? Of course you will have to look for the best way to show how you are aggrieved and mine was to strip naked so that I can be heard. (Guyson 2016)

*Wàcce* never addresses political injustices directly, but the commonalities between *wàcce* and such collective political protests is that they occur in a context of few other means to voice one's discontent. The occurrence of women's naked protest against colonial governments and the later post-independence governments, makes sense if we consider how an important consequence of colonialism was that women's power, influence, and authority were significantly reduced with the further spread of patriarchal and religious (Islamic and Christian) gender ideologies. Seeing their power in the public domain reduced, women returned to (precolonial) practices of collectively shaming men who abused their power. Looking at how, why, and when some *lesbiennes* in Senegal today resort to violence and the public humiliation of their adversaries or ex-girlfriends, we have to understand where these women come from in terms of their positions in society and their lack of other, institutionalised means to hold people accountable for abuse of power and trust. With little authority to claim, *wàcce* can be a last resort for young, unmarried *lesbiennes* to shame others as a way to avoid shame for oneself.

## On honour and shame

Shame as a means of social control becomes apparent through the centrality of honour (W: *jom*) and shame (W: *gacce*) in Senegalese societies. *Jom* signifies self-esteem and self-respect, and it refers to feelings of personal dignity (Ly 2016, 85). *Jom* and *gacce* represent two sides of the same coin: when your honour is affected, the consequence is a feeling of shame (ibid.). *Jom* constitutes the ability to meet social expectations, but it is

also about the willingness to make offers in order to save your respectability. The need to maintain your honour *coûte que coûte* comes from the serious consequence of losing it, which is abandonment by others. “*Nit bu ca jom jogée dara desatu fa*” (W: if a person’s honour is gone, there is nothing left) (Sylla 1978, 88). Refusing to be shamed means to refuse to be degraded to the status of second-class or non-citizen. *Jom* is one of the key elements that constitutes what it means to be human (Ly 2016, 107), and protecting your honour is thus a question of survival.

Women who perform *wacce* paradoxically transgress norms of modesty and respect for others, but they do this to protect or re-establish their honour in the group. Women who perform *wacce* are considered to lack feelings of shame and self-respect, because they expose themselves as violent, vulgar, and *lesbiennes*. For the women themselves, however, *wacce* is the only way that they feel able to restore or save their honour in their network of *lesbiennes*. *Wacce* creates a particular form of *lesbienne* sociality, but only if we consider what makes *wacce* emerge as a form of agency is the unique combination of social and material precarity and anti-queer sentiments.

*Wacce* relates to questions of honour and shame through its defiance of discretion (*sutura*). According to Wolof ethics, honour and shame are mediated through *sutura*, the dynamics of which, in turn, are informed by multiple hierarchies of power. In addition to the gendered expectations that wives protect the *sutura* of their husbands, the general expectation is that people reinforce the honour of their superiors by keeping their secrets and by abstaining from airing the other’s dirty laundry in public. In a study of *sutura*, Ivy Mills (2011) argues how the deployment of *sutura* often designates an unequal power relationship. Casted *gëwël* (griots, praise singers) are supposed to protect the honour of *géer* (noble, free men) by publicly praising their patron in speech and song, and by hiding their secrets. Restraint is a virtue that is valued for all Senegalese, but it is particularly expected from persons of good moral standing, and they are expected to avoid sharing their emotions in public and to demonstrate self-control by avoiding speaking and moving excessively (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Sylla 1978). Casted *gëwël*, on the other hand, can expose their body publicly in suggestive dances, or they can tell lewd stories and jokes, and publicly insult people if they do not comply with their requests for patronage. This is because *gëwël*, as a result of their low status as casted persons, are without *sutura* (Mills 2011). Such public denigration can kill, socially, the noble in question. Thus, the ability to force the noble’s hand is often ascribed to the *gëwël*. *Gëwël*, in turn, do not die, socially, for they have no honour to lose. The caste system has lost some of its structuring capacity in Senegalese society, but other phenomena have come to occupy the place of the dishonourable subject in the Senegalese imaginary. The threats to communal life that *góor-jigéen* (W: man-woman, currently used as a slur for homosexual men) supposedly pose, the degradation of morality that “prostitutes” embody, and the lack of piety that

rogue wives of Sufi *shaykhs* are thought to display, leads to the exclusion of these subjects from an idealised honourable community in ways similar to what previously happened to *g'éwě́l* (ibid.).

As long as people manage to navigate family expectations, and maintain secrecy about their sexual and romantic involvement, *góor-jigéen/gays* or *lesbiennes* need not be dishonoured. Within *lesbienne* and *gay* networks, the distinction between a state of honour and a state of shame, is between, on the one hand, those who have managed to maintain their *sutura* and thus the respect from their family and others in society, and, on the other hand, those who have lost it through previous problems with their families for their same-sex relationships. Similar to the *g'éwě́l* and *g'éer* relationship, however, the one without honour has one asset compared to the one with honour, which is the ability to attack the honour of the other person. It is this space for agency, which comes with their generally lower status in the social hierarchy, that women employ when they decide to *wácece* another woman.

Stripped of their *sutura*, their social positioning outside of what is deemed the honourable community gives these women greater freedom to show their passions compared to women from a higher social standing. Women who perform *wácece* show a refusal of a status that Mills calls “social death,” referring to having lost your honour and thus consideration of the community. They desire to live, and they actively resist their “social death” as they attempt to regain their honour. *Wácece* is thus connected to the importance of maintaining one’s sense of honour. Regarding this importance, Sylla (1978, 91) notes:

*Celui qui subit une humiliation, un affront et recule sans réagir s'entend condamner par les réprimandes les plus sévères telles que: moo ñakk jom (W: qu'il est dépourvu du sens de l'honneur); moo ñakk fayda (W: il n'a point de dignité); amul deretu gor (W: il n'a pas le sang d'un noble) (F: Anyone who suffers humiliation or affront and backs down without reacting will be condemned with the most severe scolding, such as: he lacks any sense of honour; he has no dignity; he does not have the blood of a nobleman).*

*Wácece* can be a reaction to humiliation, and a last resort for women to avoid or respond to it. Faced with a loss of status in a network of *lesbiennes* that is so dear to them, which they draw so much from in terms of friends, lovers, support, and recognition for their lives – they attempt to take back control, and turn their feelings of victimhood and humiliation into power.

## Turning the tables: The quest for respect and recognition in *lesbienne* networks

Women who perform *wàcce* are at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, having been exposed as *lesbiennes* before, and no longer enjoying *sutura* for their sexual lives. This does not mean, however, that these women lack the same respect and recognition in their *lesbienne* network. *Wàcce* is more than simply the result of a woman who has nothing to lose and who is thus informed by indifference with regards to exposure. *Wàcce* can be a way to acquire status within one's network, and particularly in the network of *lesbiennes* who go out to clubs and bars at night. In this network, many resources are shared as women depend on each other for almost everything: for friendship, love, sex, work, or income, as well as housing and care. A dependency on social relations is not unique to *lesbiennes*, but their networks are particularly dense, and, as a result tense, and restricted to a few places where they go out and meet each other in numbers. Moreover, in a societal context in which the pressure on women to get married is so high for women, and crucial to obtaining adult status, unmarried women have limited options to build a status.

One of the effects is that some of them turn their focus to the *lesbienne* milieu to build a status. “Deprived of other forms of capital, they emphasise their bodily resources,” Annick Prieur (1998, 151) argued with respect to the feminine styles of the gay men and transvestites in her research in Mexico city. Appearance is important, and depends not only on financial means – the ability to dress and impress at parties and other social events – but it also depends on one's centrality in a network of *lesbiennes*. The frequency with which you are being talked about, your popularity in attracting girlfriends, and the amount of people you care for and who, in return, care for you, are all contributing factors. With regards to the latter, kinship bonds are invoked to emphasise loyalty and support. In the previous chapter, I described the development of bonds of “oddkin” (Haraway 2016) and mothering practices as an important aspect of *lesbienne* sociality in urban Senegal. Women like Adjì, Fadiga, and Meta have mothered many women, supporting them materially, psychologically, as well as socially. These mothers are recognised to be mothers in their *lesbienne* network, and for this they get respect. Status implies hierarchy, however, and the quest for status can lead to competition among women. If a mother's position is challenged by another mother, the group (mother and her children) may *wàcce* this other mother to restore their power or dominance in their network. The paradoxical demands of appearance and visibility within *lesbienne* networks combined with the necessity of discretion with regards to same-sex relationships in society at large makes women vulnerable when they are the target of a *wàcce*.

In the previous chapter, I explained how Adjì has become a mother to about fifteen women. Over the last couple of years, she has provided them with housing and food when



they needed it, and she has also been advising them on how to behave when facing the police. In return, her children give her respect and recognition – important symbolic capital. They are loyal to Adjì when she gets into trouble with another woman, and she can count on them for help to *wàcce* another woman. For a while, Adjì has been in competition with Dieynaba who, like her, is a mother to a number of women. Their competition over recognition centres around visible performances of wealth, both in people and in currency. The ability to mobilise others when you need to *wàcce* another woman to restore your position in a *lesbienne* network is a sign of social capital (Diabate 2020a). The parties that my *lesbienne* interlocutors frequented often had a *marraine* (F: godmother, host), who is both in a position to be honoured by visitors of the party and in a position to honour the artists animating the party. The *marraine* is expected to visibly throw money at the performing artist. While visibly throwing money at *gèwël* and artists who praise you in their songs is required, the amount of money spent and the attitude with which this is done are carefully observed by others. While one should definitely not be stingy, the opposite might be read as too arrogant and out of place in a setting like this one where Dieynaba and Adjì are in competition for their position in this network. After one such night in 2021, when Adjì felt that Dieynaba's attitude as a *marraine* had been too arrogant, showing off her wealth and demonstrating contempt for Adjì and her children, Adjì's children initiated a *wàcce*. After the party had ended, the group took a couple of taxis in the direction of Dieynaba's house, where they yelled obscenities, spilled the contents of garbage bins into her room, and demolished the doors and windows of her apartment. Adjì had not requested her children to do this *wàcce*, and she argued that it had been their own initiative to protect Adjì's, and their own honour and status. This *wàcce* had fizzled out without much further trouble for Dieynaba. Her landlord had not been interested in calling the police; indeed, his only concern was that someone would pay for the broken windows and door. About Dieynaba's personal status, Adjì commented that "*De toute façon c'est une pute, tout le monde sait ce qu'elle vit*" (F: She's a prostitute anyway, everybody knows what she lives). Bringing down Dieynaba is not just about getting her into trouble in her neighbourhood by outing her as a *lesbienne*, it is also a way of teaching her a lesson in humility. Whenever Adjì or Dieynaba feel that the other flaunts her wealth or pride too much, a *wàcce* may be performed to bring her back down.

*Wàcce* is part of the repertoire of Adjì and her children as they claim authority and prestige in their social networks. In general, a certain penchant for drama characterises the lives of many women in the world of *wàcce*. One day, when I visited Adjì, she showed me the medical bills that she had recently paid for her girlfriend. The two had fought and when Adjì had told her girlfriend that their relationship was over, her girlfriend had jumped from the second floor of the house. "*Elle voulait se suicider*" (F: She wanted to commit suicide), Adjì said, laughing. She also had a scar under her left eye, caused

by Adjì. They did not break up, and they lived together at the time of my stay. Her girlfriend helped Adjì with her commerce (she sold skin whitening lotions), while they were looking for another job for her.<sup>104</sup> When I first met Adjì, in June 2021, she showed me a video of herself lifting weights in the gym, to illustrate how she prepared herself physically for fights. Such preparation reveals the often premeditated character of *wàcce*. She shared such videos with her children as well, as part of her mothering revolved around transmitting the knowledge of how to be strong vis-à-vis anyone who would try to humiliate them, by mocking or insulting them or by stealing their girlfriend. By performing a *wàcce* collectively, Adjì's children were trained in this practice of self-defence against humiliation.

When I visited Adjì again in January 2022, she had moved to a different apartment. Instead of one small bedroom and bathroom, she now lived in a well-equipped three-bedroom apartment. She was on the phone when I arrived, negotiating the price of a four-wheel drive that she wanted to buy. Neither she, nor her girlfriend had a driver's licence at that moment, but they were planning to start driving lessons soon. When she hung up, she immediately received another call from a client who asked for her advice on how to quickly whiten her skin for her wedding day the next week. Adjì advised her to buy a syrup (5,000 FCFA, about 7,50 euros), mixed with her cream (8,000 FCFA, about 12 euros), as well as a soap (5,000 FCFA). How did you acquire this knowledge about these products? I asked. "*Je n'ai pas de réponse, c'est un don de Dieu*" (F: I don't have an answer, it's a gift from God), she replied. Her girlfriend nodded in confirmation. I learned that she had only started this business a year ago, and I was surprised by the number of clients that she had managed to gather in such a short time. They clearly paid her well too, telling from the upgrade in her apartment and the car she was about to buy. "*Encore, c'est Dieu... et des produits de qualité*" (F: Again, it's God... and good quality products). The growth of her business was accompanied by a move towards a different lifestyle. She had moved on, she said, and she had left behind some of her old friends and children, because their lifestyle no longer matched with Adjì's. She hadn't seen Awa in a long time, for example, which she explained by her going to new "*endroits de classe*" (F: classy places), and she no longer wanted to "*fréquenter les petit jump, elles sont trop vulgaires*" (F: hang out with the small *jump*, they are too vulgar). Being quite successful with her business of selling skin whitening lotions to a large clientele outside of her *lesbienne* networks, she wanted to avoid being associated with the *jump* that she used to hang out with. She had also stopped boasting about her *wàcce* to me. "*À un moment donné il faut passer à autre chose. Il faut avancer dans la vie, quoi*" (F: At some point, you have to move on to other things. You have to move on in life, you know), she said.<sup>105</sup> *Wàcce* is temporary in nature, and with assuming more responsibilities in life, and with more to lose, most women will cease engaging with women who may do *wàcce*.

<sup>104</sup> Conversations with Adjì and her girlfriend, 8 June 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Conversation with Adjì, 24 January 2022.

Adji still applies some of the same techniques of self-defence, especially her verbal wit, to assert her position, now primarily as a trader who produces her own quality creams. She proudly shares testimonies from her clients on her WhatsApp status, which show how well her lotions work to bleach the skin. When she found out that someone had taken her photos and had published them on her own WhatsApp, pretending that they were her own lotions, Adji had not hesitated to call the woman to insult her. Not that she is a stranger to some trickery herself: she had published a video of my white skin on her WhatsApp with her own voice-over “*mashallah sama cliente bu wéex tàll*” (W: *mashallah*, my client who’s snow white).<sup>106</sup> When I suggested that no one would believe that my skin had become so white with whitening lotions, she assured me that people would, because her products, which she mixed herself as a “*chimiste*” (F: chemist), as she calls herself, were of good quality, contrary to most of the whitening creams on the market. In her business, like previously in her relation to Dieynaba and other *lesbiennes*, Adji asserted her dominance through claiming moral virtue, authenticity, and authority. She earned her money and status through hard work and a talent for business, where Dieynaba supposedly goes out at night (W: *génn guddi*) to sustain her *lesbienne* lifestyle, and where other traders sold cheaply imported whitening creams while pretending to sell quality products.

Knowing that I spoke to *ni génn guddi* for my research, Adji told me to advise them to stop *jaay boppam* (W: selling their body).

*Ce n'est pas un travail digne... jamais une femme ne devrait vendre son corps. Le corps d'une femme est sacré. Kan moo júr ministres? Kan moo júr président? Jigéen. Les femmes donnent naissance à tout le monde, et seules les femmes peuvent donner naissance. Son corps vaut plus que de l'or. Il ne faut pas le vendre. C'est ma philosophie: travailler dans la dignité* (F/W: It's not a worthy job... a woman should never sell her body. A woman's body is sacred. Who gives birth to ministers? Who gives birth to the president? Women. Women give birth to everyone, and only women can give birth. Her body is worth more than gold. One should not sell it. It's my philosophy: work with dignity).

Assuring me that she has always “worked with dignity,” also when she was still active with *wàcce*, Adji’s move towards a new lifestyle nevertheless conveys her idea that such a lifestyle of violence and exposure is not a sustainable lifestyle. As a woman, to move on in life, as she called it, and to gain more respect, in a broader societal sense, she needed to let go of all too much violent drama.

<sup>106</sup> Arabic, literally meaning “God has willed it,” and often used to congratulate someone, to indicate that something good has happened.

Where Adji had seemed to move on and had left *wacce* behind, others have always tried to keep their distance from such practices. The challenge for women is to balance the demands of their *lesbienne* networks, useful for visibility and physical assertion as a way to build a status, with the demands of family and wider society for discretion and respectable and modest behaviour. The story of Fama, a twenty-seven-year-old *lesbienne*, illustrates some of the tensions that may come with striking a balance between status and respect in *lesbienne* networks and maintaining good relationships with family and neighbours. Whenever I discussed the topic of *wacce* with her, she was always quick to distance herself from it. At the same time, her story reveals that it is not always one's own choice to engage in such practices or not. In Dakar's well-connected *lesbienne* networks, *wacce* might just happen to you as you go through a break-up or if you challenge someone else's position in the network too much. Attempting to reconstruct one's reputation after *wacce* may require you to accept someone else's status, and leaving the fights behind may be the only way to return to normalcy and restore relationships with family and neighbours.

Fama recounted how, in 2017, she was *wacce* by Dieynaba, the same woman who competed with Adji over status in the *lesbienne* milieu. Dieynaba had been angry at Fama for having supposedly stolen her girlfriend Adama. Fama and Adama were not dating, but Fama had been accommodating Adama, who was her niece, for several months. Adama had experienced troubles at home with her own family, after they had found out that she had a same-sex lover. Her mother, who was Fama's half-sister, had sent Adama to Dakar to stay with Fama, and had asked Fama to look after her and to make sure she focused on her studies. In Dakar, Adama had started dating Dieynaba, whom Fama knew well. Soon, Fama's niece started neglecting her studies, spending most of her time in bars, and with her new girlfriend. At one point, Adama did not return home to Fama for a couple of days, and Fama did not know where she was, until a *gay* man they all knew told her that he had seen Adama at her new girlfriend's house. Fama alerted Adama's mother; the next morning, they took a taxi to Dieynaba's house to demand Adama return home. Dieynaba and Adama protested, arguing that Adama was free to choose where she would spend her time, but Fama had said, "*Adama et moi nous sommes liées par le sang, j'ai donc une responsabilité envers elle*" (F: Adama and I are connected through blood, so I have a responsibility towards her).<sup>107</sup> Adama's mother decided to take her home with her, outside of Dakar. The next day, Adama headed back to Dakar. In the meantime, Dieynaba had decided that she would not leave it at this and she decided to *wacce koñ bi* (W: bring down the neighbourhood). She came to Fama's house with a couple of friends, in taxis loudly claxoning, shouting in front of Fama's house. Fama recounted to me what they had shouted: "*génmal Fama, dañu lay rey*" (W: get out Fama, we will kill you), and "*lesbienne la, day katt jigéen*" (W: she's a *lesbienne*, she fucks women), and "*dafa réew*"

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Fama, 1 August 2021.

(W: she's naughty, impolite).<sup>108</sup> To shout such indecent things in public is, needless to say, unspeakable. Fama was at home with her brother's girlfriend, who had temporarily moved in with Fama.<sup>109</sup> Precisely because Fama was so close with her family, and at this moment quite literally too, the *wàcce* was effective. Fama said of Dieynaba's choice to do *wàcce*,

*Elle peut faire du wàcce parce que tout le monde connaît sa vie. Elle n'en a rien à foutre. Tout le monde la connaît, parce que parfois tu la vois dans les réseaux sociaux, dans les journaux: xoolal ki, lesbienne la... donc elle n'en a rien à foutre. Dafa def lu ko neex* (F/W: She can do *wàcce* because everyone knows her life. She doesn't give a damn. Everyone knows her, because sometimes you see her on social media, in the newspapers: look at this one, she's a *lesbienne*... so she doesn't give a damn. She does whatever she wants).

Dieynaba had not appreciated Fama meddling in her love affairs, so she had shown her power over Fama by publicly humiliating her. Being exposed and humiliated in one's neighbourhood is painful, but one can move out, and in a big city like Dakar, it is fairly easy to relocate to another neighbourhood in order to never have to confront the shame of meeting your former neighbours again. Being exposed among your own family, however, can cause you much more trouble. Since Fama was hosting her brother's girlfriend at the moment this *wàcce* happened, and she had heard the insults, she called Fama's sister to tell her what had happened. The next day, her sister and mother were standing on the doorstep having come to take Fama home to their village. As soon as they arrived home, Fama escaped and she took a bus back to Dakar. Realising that her family would probably not leave it at that, she decided to spend the night at her friend's place, rather than return to her own room. And indeed, a day later her sister, who is a police officer, returned to Dakar with a police escort to come and get Fama. They broke into Fama's room and took most of her stuff when they did not find her there. Fama decided to move to a different neighbourhood, because "*À ce moment-là tout le quartier pensait que j'étais un voyou*" (F: By then the entire neighbourhood thought I was a thug). This shows the potential of *wàcce* to really hurt and humiliate another person. This potential is only increasing with the growing anxiety over "lesbianism." It also points, once more, at the messiness of kin relations, and at the complex entanglements of biological kin and oddkin that can at once be great sources of well-being and security while also being sources of conflict.

<sup>108</sup> *Katt* is a vulgar way of referring to sexual intercourse, and it is used when insulting someone.

<sup>109</sup> Fama's brother's girlfriend had come to Dakar to hide her pregnancy from people back home. Being a Christian woman in a relationship with a Muslim man, her family had not agreed with their wish to get married. In the meantime, the woman had got pregnant, and though this might advance her case within her family for marriage, she came to Dakar temporarily to escape the gazes and judgements of neighbours in the small village.

Despite having been in trouble with her family and her neighbourhood after being *wàcce*, a couple of years later, things have calmed down. Fama is respected in the neighbourhood in which she currently lives, and she has restored the relations with her family. Even her sister, the police officer, with whom she did not speak for five years after these events, is back on speaking terms with her. Fama has worked on her relationship with her parents and siblings over the past few years, by supporting her family financially whenever she can, and by respecting important family gatherings during religious holidays and ceremonies like baptisms, marriages, and funerals. She therefore has good reasons to stay away from *wàcce* dynamics. She is very critical about women who perform *wàcce* in order to “be the buzz,” as she referred to being seen and talked about in their *lesbienne* networks (Oudenhuijsen 2021b). Fama does recognise the importance of being talked about and being visible in the milieu, and she achieves this, among other things, by engaging in romantic relationships with multiple women at the same time. Although managing multiple relationships is tricky in itself, Fama makes great efforts to carefully balance being talked about and being seen with many women, while not allowing intense emotions to take over, which could lead to a *wàcce* if one of them finds out that Fama has other girlfriends. Likewise, she has tried her best, and with success, to create a stable housing situation, which includes good relationships with her neighbours. When I visited her in February 2022 she proudly told me how her neighbours had told her mother, who had come to visit, that Fama was such a gentle, respectable woman.

*Ils savent que je suis lesbienne à cause de mon style et du fait que je vis avec Souadou. Mais ils s'en fichent, je ne crée pas de problèmes dans le quartier. Je suis toujours aimable avec les gens, je salue tout le monde, j'offre des pièces aux gens si j'en ai* (F: They know I'm a *lesbienne* because of what I wear, and the fact that I live with Souadou [her girlfriend]. But they don't care, I don't cause any trouble in the neighbourhood. I am always friendly to people, greeting everyone, offering people small change if I have it).

Fama tries to avoid getting into trouble with Dieynaba again, who has a larger network to mobilise support from, but whenever the two meet each other, Fama acts cool around her.

*Si je montre que j'ai peur... comment puis-je l'expliquer? Elle t'humiliera. Elle te pousse à dire certaines choses. Elle t'humiliera, quoi* (F: When I show fear... how can I explain it? She will humiliate you. She will push you to say certain things. She will humiliate you, you know).

Fama refuses to show any sign of Dieynaba's power over her. At the same time, by avoiding her, she confirms Dieynaba's status in this network. It is important for people to defend their honour by refusing to be humiliated, also, or perhaps especially, when you face mockery regularly. The quote in the title of this chapter, "*tu me piétines, je t'écrase*" (F: you trample me, I crush you) refers to this necessity to get the upper hand in a fight. It is the motto of Awa, one of Adjì's children, who had learned from Adjì how to fight back when she is mocked, and how to keep her dignity whenever she faces the police. Having experienced quite some mockery in *lesbienne* networks for a lack of urban suave in her early days in Dakar, and being ridiculed by strangers for her masculine appearance, Awa has developed a fieriness and readiness to fight anyone who acts like they are superior to her. In an ethnography of *jotas* (effeminate homosexual men) and *vestidas* (transvestites) in Mexico city, Annick Prieur (1998, 83) demonstrates similar reasoning from her interlocutors about their street fights: "Up to a certain limit, you must accept that people pester, but after that, you have to fight back, to keep your status," said Mema, her principal interlocutor and gatekeeper. For these men, living at the margins of urban society, their capacity to fight back was essential to claim a presence in their social worlds. Mema, Fama, and Awa's ideas about status and humiliation seem to align, when Mema furthermore added, in response to Prieur's question about the black eye he had got from the particular street fight she had witnessed, "If I don't defend myself in that situation, I'll get into a vicious circle, and will get a lot more trouble later. Everyone will try to assert himself" (ibid.). If Awa turned away from violence, and accepted being mocked or insulted, she would be seen as acquiescing to her marginal positionality in urban networks, including the *lesbienne* networks. It is this desire to become relevant, then, that leads women, occasionally, to turn to violence.

## Conclusion

This chapter sought an answer to the question of how we should understand the prevalence of *wàcce* among people who are generally concerned with keeping their relationships a secret. However paradoxical it may seem, *wàcce* violence and the exposure this means for the *lesbiennes* involved can thus be made sense of if we consider the forms of sociality that emerge in their tight-knit networks. *Wàcce* acts are constitutive of alleged wickedness, because of their revealing of social problems, in what many consider uncivil and inappropriate ways. Through questioning why women would violently out their peers, and themselves, in a context of growing anti-queer sentiments, I have begun to see the many different stakes involved in *wàcce* dynamics. Rather than seeing *wàcce* violence as purely destructive, it is a way for some women to take back control and re-position themselves in the world. Seeing women as either victim or perpetrator of such violence would be reductive of the complex context in which they live. If we analyse the reasons why they turn to *wàcce* violence, and the effects on their positions in the urban milieu,

on their status in society, and on the strength and depth of their social networks, we can understand how women are both victims and agents in their social worlds.

Through *wàcce*, women expose another person's moral wrongdoing. Women who perform *wàcce* invoke notions of reciprocity and morality when they attack another woman for offending these values. The women who perform *wàcce* attempt to re-establish moral boundaries and hierarchies in their relationships with (former) lovers, friends, and others in their networks. Because shame informs communal inclusion and exclusion, *wàcce* practices of exposing and shaming someone for being a *lesbienne*, are an attempt to shift ideas about who should be excluded. *Wàcce* hereby engages with social status both within *lesbienne* networks, as the capacity to mobilise others to *wàcce* others builds reputation, and beyond those networks in society at large, by attempting to reveal someone's unsocial practices. By performing *wàcce*, women turn their humiliation into power, however temporary. *Wàcce* is certainly risky behaviour, also for the women who perform it, but it is one of the many risks that women face in their environment. While, at first sight, it may appear to be a mere eruption of violence and a lack of emotional restraint, upon closer inspection it is about much more than just punishing another woman for having hurt you. It is about restoring one's own reputation and sense of worth.

This analysis of *wàcce* among *lesbiennes* in Senegal builds upon the work of Serena Dankwa (2021), Gloria Wekker (2006), and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2010) who have written about violent conflicts between same-sex desiring women. Tinsley (2010) has argued how rivalries between lovers and friends in same-sex networks are intensified by a context that has granted women little to claim as their own. Conflicts, then, are an expression of women's desire to possess and keep the little that is available to them. Dankwa (2021) has analysed how the potential for conflict and abuse in women's same-sex relationships can also be the result of age differences. The authority that comes with women's seniority, can lead a more senior woman to attempt to control the (flirting, romantic) behaviour of a younger lover (Wekker 2006), and age gaps between women carry the potential of abuse by an older woman of her younger lover. Attending to the dynamics of seniority in women's same-sex relationships allows for a deeper understanding of the relational nature of power hierarchies and dynamics in women's romantic relationships. This chapter contributes to this scholarship on women's same-sex networks by analysing some of the outcomes of violent conflicts among women.

I have shown how the practice of *wàcce* has the potential to create new social hierarchies and inequalities between women who are somehow all positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. *Wàcce* serves the negotiation of social hierarchies in these women's networks, where successful performances of superiority – in appearance, verbal wit, and physical domination – gain women respect and recognition in their network.



The ability to mobilise the most (girl)friends when they need to *wácece* another woman, confirms their status in their networks. Women who perform *wácece* quite literally fight for their honour, when they feel they have just been stripped of it. Women's reassertion of their honour is not one that is detached from the rest of society, and it is simultaneously a repositioning of oneself in one's networks of relationships – both in *lesbienne* networks, in their families, and in society.

The cases in this chapter of women who do *wácece* invite us to rethink conceptualisations of agency and social status. People's capacity to act upon their own life does not exist in a vacuum, and is not free from constraining socio-political contexts and the relationships that people are embedded in. But depending on one's positionality in society, people have different possibilities to survive and to create space for their supposedly wicked lives. Where the *féministes* in Chapter One possess a certain amount of cultural capital to take part in public debates about women's rights and positions in society, most of my interlocutors who are *ñi génn guddi* or *lesbiennes* lack this capital. In various other ways, women have shown ways to navigate stigma concerning their supposedly wicked behaviour. For all of them, sticking together has been crucial. However, the tight-knit networks of oddkin and friends that they developed consequently also create the conditions for conflict in a context of material precarity and social exclusion. Care and solidarity coexist with conflict and violence. These conflicts between *lesbiennes* in particular, in which they violently exposed their peers for the moral injury that was inflicted on them, reveal *wácece* as a form of naked agency for women who have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Emerging from a context of vulnerability and victimhood, these women turn to violence as a last resort, to restore their honour. Even when such acts backfire on them.

**Conclusion:**  
**Women's *savoir vivre***  
**in a context**  
**of gender panic**

With this dissertation, I set out to understand women's gender and sexual dissidence in relation to broader social transformations in Senegal. Analysing gender panic and public debates about women's rights and -positions in society, on the one hand, I have studied how various forms of gender and sexual dissidence coalesce in the categorisation of "wicked" women (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001). On the other hand, I have brought together a variety of cases of women whose behaviour has come to be seen as a threat to the social and moral order of society. I started this dissertation with the question: *How do "wicked" women navigate gendered societal expectations and gender panic as they craft their lives?* I explored how different forms of agency have emerged, and transformed, among *féministes*, lesbiennes, and *ni génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night, i.e. women who engage in commercial sex), as women give shape to their supposedly wicked lives amidst gender panic, constraining gender and sexual norms, and in often precarious material circumstances.

The dissertation moved between women's engagements with public debates and representations of gender and sexualities on the one hand, and women's positioning and repositioning in their own social environments on the other. Women's agency shifts in the midst of intensifying public debates, but it does not wither. Through their craftiness, women develop a *savoir vivre*, a knowledge of how to live well, which enables them to respond to the boundaries of "acceptable" behaviour. Zooming in on so-called wicked women has allowed me to grasp the centrality of craftiness to navigate dissident practices in a context of gender panic. This allows for a deeper understanding of women's positioning as they respond to, but also as they generate social transformations.

## **Patriarchal anxieties in postcolonial Senegal**

A key takeaway of this ethnography is that gender is important for understanding how women become cast as wicked. Studies of sexualities in Africa have demonstrated that gender is crucial for understanding sexuality because it "is an essential part of how people understand themselves, and it refers to social understandings and representations of being wo/man" (Spronk 2012, 33; see also Dankwa 2009; 2011; Gaudio 2009; Reid 2013). This dissertation has focused mostly on cases of sexual dissidence, but the overarching conclusions are about gender. Because sexuality is an important terrain through which gender relations take shape, transgressions of gender norms often become apparent through sexual acts. Fulfilling gendered expectations depends heavily on (women's) proper sexual conduct, and therefore supposed sexual immorality often serves as the grounds for casting women as "wicked." The stigmatisation of women often revolves around accusations of women being *caga* (W: "prostitute") or *lesbienne*. The dominant representation in the media of *lesbiennes* as "sentimental" and grouping together in "gangs" (see Chapter Four), however, expresses a fear of women who conspire against men in

groups. As women supposedly group together to escape control, they raise patriarchal anxieties about the loss of control over women.

Where *lesbiennes* are stigmatised, the concern is not primarily with their supposed same-sex orientation. The negative representation in the media of *lesbiennes* as violent women resembles that of women in polygynous marriages who engage in fights with one another (see Chapter Four). Together, such representations conjure up an image of women as lacking restraint and civility. This feeds misogynous ideas of supposedly hot-headed women who are caught up in allegedly trivial questions of interpersonal strife and status, and it suits patriarchal preoccupations of pitting women against each other (Gueye 2010a). By highlighting their aggressive behaviour, women's moral degeneracy is supposedly proven, and heteropatriarchal power – in the form of polygynous men or homophobic legislation and rhetoric for example – remains untouched by critique.

The patriarchal anxieties that are expressed through panic about the moral degeneration of society affect the possibilities of feminist activism. Senegalese *féministes* have been fighting for the right to abortion for decades, and although such demands have always been met with opposition, today they are increasingly linked to LGBTQI+ sexualities as a way to silence its proponents. *Féministes* are accused of conspiring with the West in a project to depopulate Africa with the legalisation of abortion and of LGBTQI+ sexualities. Such panic reflects anxieties about the reproduction of the population, and of the loss of patriarchal power structures (Tamale 2020). As a result of such panic, *féministes* largely keep quiet about questions of same-sex sexualities. Moreover, the risk of being exposed as a *lesbienne* has worked to silence women who have advocated for the right to abortion, as the story of Nguenar in chapter one showed.

*Ni génn guddi* have been somewhat exempted from the current gender panic, but popular discourse nevertheless condemns women who go out at night for resorting to all sorts of immoral vice to obtain material wealth. Anxieties about the spread of commercial sex practices are visible in the media representation of women. Newspaper headings like “Object of all desires: The iPhone makes Senegalese women lose their minds. They are ready to sell their body for an iPhone” (Thior and Pouye 2020) put forward the idea that women in particular are susceptible to moral corruption. Concerns with women's propensity to immoral behaviour puts women under more scrutiny. They are stigmatised for their dissidence because it is understood to potentially upset the gender order. Therefore, when analysing women's stigmatisation as “wicked” and the responses that women develop to navigate such stigma, we have to look at the intersections of sexuality with gender, among other factors like socio-economic status.

Related to the argument that gender is an important factor for understanding how women become cast as “wicked,” is the point that the concern with women’s sexuality is not a question of sexual desires, orientations, or practices per se. Sexuality is a source of anxiety, but it is also a politically salient site for debate and contention through which political authorities claim power and influence in the public sphere (Bop 2008; Currier 2018; Meiu 2022; Nyanzi 2013; Tamale 2013). To address questions of sexual dissidence meaningfully, then, we may sometimes need to decentre sexuality from our analysis to focus on how gender panics emerge as a discourse that articulates other anxieties (Herd 2009; Meiu 2023; Rao 2020).

The story of Ndella (Chapter Two) is insightful here. As a young teenager, she was called *caga* by her father when she came home from an evening at the beach with friends. Whether she was actually engaged in commercial sex by going out at night or by doing *mbaraan* (W: having multiple romantic or sexual partners from whom one receives material gifts) was not the family’s biggest concern: her father called her out because she was spending her money on herself, instead of sharing it with her family. Years later, when she had started dating Arame, her family accused Arame of having led Ndella astray, luring her into “lesbianism.” Arame had been taking care of Ndella financially by paying for her professional studies, something that Ndella’s family had never managed to do. It revealed a feeling of parental loss of control over their child’s life decisions, and a fear that this further worsened the family’s already precarious economic situation, as Ndella increasingly spent time away from her family to focus on her studies and her relationship to Arame. In addition to the importance of religious morality campaigns, political power contestations, and political leaders’ strategies of scapegoating certain groups and holding them responsible for economic malaise, such a sense of parental loss of control over youth who cease to respond to kinship obligations of reciprocity and sharing is important for understanding widely shared anxieties about sexuality (Pierce 2016).-

In widespread anxiety about sexuality, “lesbians” and “prostitutes” occupy a particular position as supposed threats to the postcolonial state. According to Jacqui M. Alexander (2005, 22-23):

Women’s sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state [...] Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation [...] [P]articular figures have come to embody this eroticism, functioning historically as the major symbols of threat. At this moment in the neocolonial state’s diffusion of sexualized definitions of morality, sexual and erotic autonomy have been most frequently cathected on the body of the prostitute and the lesbian. [T]he categories “lesbian” and “prostitute” are now positioned together within black heteropatriarchy as outlaw, operating outside

the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it.

“Prostitutes” have historically functioned as epitomes of dissidence, as women’s commercial sex practices have largely remained elusive to state control (White 1990). The way that “prostitutes” have functioned as a symbol of threat in Senegal is apparent since prostitution became regulated in the 1940s. The regulation of prostitution functions as a powerful mechanism for the exclusion of women who do not conform to sexual norms, and it provides a framework for the control over women’s sexuality (Bowen and Bungay 2016).

The control over people’s sexual behaviour has been high on the agenda recently, and it has been particularly visible in a proposal for a new law in 2021 that sought to further criminalise same-sex sexualities in Senegal. In these attempts, *lesbiennes* have joined “prostitutes” as epitomes of dissidence. The anti-queer protests *Non à l’homosexualité* of 2021 and 2022 alerted the public to the rise of “lesbianism” in Senegal: largely ignoring women’s same-sex practices thus far had supposedly led to a “lesbianisation” of society. The way men who are presumed to be *gay* have been victims of witch hunts, (mob) violence and the mediatisation of “scandals” about supposed “gay weddings” (Coly 2019; Mbaye 2016) can similarly be understood as resulting from gender panic. As supposedly *gay* men, they transgress the heteropatriarchal imperative of cross-sex relationships and the control over women’s bodies that comes with such relationships. Together with fierce resistance against women’s activism for access to abortion, these are attempts at holding on to colonial patriarchal power relations in the face of power contestations and change in family structures (Tamale 2020).

The putting into discourse of female and dissident sexualities, which runs against some long-standing expectations and values of discretion around matters of sexuality, signals a growing anxiety over the loss of control over women’s bodies and sexualities. It also reveals how heteropatriarchy is constantly being defended through the reiteration of norms, the identification of bodies that should be excluded from normative citizenship, and through the policing of morality (Meiu 2022; Wiegman and Wilson 2015). Leaders have politicised questions of gender and sexuality as they construct ideas about national identity and citizenship in an attempt to secure the status quo and their own power therein. The problems and uncertainties associated with socio-economic transformations are largely displaced onto women’s bodies, who become blamed for social ills (Sow 1997).

Some political and religious leaders are mobilising “traditional values” in postcolonial contexts like Senegal to serve anti-colonial arguments against the continuous power of the West and the influence on supposedly traditional Senegalese ways of living. Such

discourses constitute Senegal as radically different from the West, a dominant tendency in much scholarship and popular thinking on Africa (Awondo 2012; Awondo, Geschiere and Reid 2012; Diabate 2020a). In presenting a stable and static image of Senegalese socio-cultural norms, conservative political and religious leaders ignore the ever-shifting nature of norms and practices. Studying supposedly wicked women and their interactions with gender and sexual norms, gender panic, and family expectations, has provided a framework for understanding how social transformations engender not only gender panic, but also bring about particular forms of dissident practices.

## **Situating “wicked” women in the study of gender and sexualities in Africa**

By studying ethnographically how *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* navigate gender norms and gender panic as they craft their lives, I have drawn upon three interrelated scholarly fields: African feminist analysis, queer African studies, and studies pertaining to global health and development. These fields have made important contributions to the scholarly debates about gender and sexuality. For a long time, studies on sexuality, women’s bodies, and women’s sexual pleasure were absent from most African feminist analysis (Hendriks and Spronk 2020; McFadden 2003; Spronk 2012). A racist colonial history of the study of sexualities in Africa as one of “permissiveness” and “sexual excess” (McClintock 1995; Salo and Gqola 2006) led many African feminist scholars to approach the study of sexualities with caution. Although much research on sexualities in Africa remains donor-driven and informed by the portrayal of sex as a “problem,” the scholarship on sexualities in Africa has expanded considerably (Arnfred 2009; Hendriks and Spronk 2020). I drew upon this growing field of studies on sexualities in the field of African feminist analysis as I explored the, sometimes tense, relations between sexual rights debates and feminism in Senegal. This dissertation contributes to the field of African feminist analysis by analysing how same-sex sexualities enter the spaces of feminist analysis and activism. Although this remains a challenge, particularly in a time when accusing someone of being a *lesbienne* is the fastest way to silence her, some of my interlocutors have demonstrated how they find ways to carefully address sexual rights in their work, even if much secrecy is required.

In the fields of global health and development, which significantly increased research activities in Africa in the 1980s with the discovery of HIV/AIDS, studies of sexualities were predominantly approached as a problem (Hendriks and Spronk 2020). Epidemiological studies of individuals’ “risky” sex practices have been central to much research (Cornwall and Jolly 2009), and in studies of “sex work,” women’s agency is often denied as “sex work” is understood to be the result of coercion or violence (Ditmore 2008). In this dissertation, I have moved beyond an analysis of the reasons why women choose to engage in commercial sex, and instead I focused on the centrality of women’s “oddkin”

(Haraway 2016) bonds with other *ñi génn guddi* and with *lesbiennes*, and the forms of sociality and dependency that emerged in women's networks as they seek ways to navigate the challenges of life together.

The field of queer African studies is budding, yet ethnographic knowledge on same-sex desiring women remains scarce. To date, Serena Dankwa's (2021) *Knowing Women* remains the only monograph published on women's same-sex intimacies in West Africa, in addition to Zethu Matebeni's (2011) monograph on black lesbian identities in Johannesburg, and the ethnographic work of Henriette Gunkel (2009; 2010) on same-sex desiring women in South Africa. In Senegal, studies on same-sex sexualities have focused almost exclusively on male same-sex intimacies. My contribution to the field of queer African studies is an ethnographic inquiry into same-sex desiring women in Senegal. It reveals the many crafts that women develop to follow their same-sex desires, including concealment, secrecy and trickery. Most importantly, this dissertation shows how the necessity for women to stick together and transmit the know-how of navigating same-sex desires together, also creates the conditions for conflict among women.

Overall, the developments in these three scholarly fields reveal how women's lives and sexualities are often studied in silos: research on same-sex sexualities is often conducted separately from research on "sex work" and from gender research. The main contribution of this dissertation is that I bring these three fields together. I have brought together three groups of women who are differently positioned in society, and who have consequently largely been studied separately. By bringing *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* together in one study, I challenge the compartmentalisation of research by showing how different acts of dissidence, such as same-sex love, commercial sex, or vocally contesting particularly gendered norms such as *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) and *muñ* (W: enduring, persisting silently in the face of hardship), coalesce and bring about forms of agency whereby the supposed differences between these women are sidestepped. I have shown how women's craftiness in navigating gender dissidence differs on some points, while converging on other points. Particularly in a time of right-wing nationalism and populist rhetoric that has appropriated identity politics as a way of pitting groups against one another, undoing the fragmentation of society into isolated, supposedly incompatible identities and groups is crucial (Eng and Puar 2020).

## **An ethnography of gender dissidence**

Faced with rising anti-queer sentiments and gender panic, I was interested in understanding how women's agency takes shape and transforms, in the midst of intensifying debates and public visibility. Following a qualitative methodology, this thesis offers a contemporary ethnography of gender dissidence in urban Senegal. By



following women in their everyday lives, I have been able to observe how they navigate their relationships with friends, lovers, family, and in a professional context, as they seek ways to live their dissident lives.

This dissertation started and ended with the role of the public sphere in delimiting women's agency at the precipice of supposed wickedness. In Chapter One, I explored how *féministes* give shape to their agency in the public sphere in a context of gender panic. This context, and particularly the virulent anti-queer debates of the last years, highlights new tensions concerning women's agency. From these debates emerges a picture that, despite an increased visibility of *féministes* and a growing presence of women in the public sphere in positions of leadership, there is little room for a questioning of gender and sexual norms. Female sexualities remain seriously policed, and the efforts of women to acquire the right to abortion in cases of incest or rape are heavily combated. The domain of sexual rights proves to be a contentious terrain, and anti-queer sentiments in particular, mark the precipice of supposed wickedness in the current era. Nguenar's decision to take a step back from abortion activism for fear of being publicly accused of being a *lesbienne*, reveals how anti-queer sentiments impact feminist activism.

In a postcolonial context, critiquing *féministes* for being uprooted and Westernised is an effective way to disqualify women's agency as disrespectful and ignorant of local cultural and religious values. Nguenar argued about the consequences that women face for speaking out in public that “*Ku bëgg wax, day gaawa dee*” (W: the one who likes to talk dies quickly). Speaking out publicly about questions of gender and sexuality is subject to backlash, and this helps us to understand that speaking out is not a preferred option for most women. Where the cultural expectation of *sutura* has transformed with the liberalisation of the media, leading to a “sexualised public sphere” (A. Diop 2012; Wittmann 2008) in which sexuality is extensively discussed, *sutura* nevertheless remains a stick to beat those women who challenge the patriarchal status quo. Paradoxically, women's spaces for dissident expressions may shrink with growing public debate about sexual rights. While the public sphere is an important arena for the debate about women's rights and for setting public norms pertaining to women's roles and behaviour, to really understand how women's lives are impacted by social transformations we have to look beyond these debates.

Most women respond to, and navigate, gender and sexual norms by staying away from these tense public debates. In Chapter Two, I analysed how women draw on the affordances of silence, ambiguity, and elusiveness to live their lives as supposedly wicked women. Women's gender dissidence is largely shaped by the Senegalese norm of *sutura*. By maintaining ambiguity and elusiveness around their persona, women avoid public debates and discourses about LGBTQI+ identities, prostitution, or feminism.

Women crafted *pexe jigéen* (W: women's solutions) that enabled them to avoid coming into full view, which would make them vulnerable to criticism and stigma. Whether it is the shifting ambiguity of religious and gender appearances that Astou embodies, the tricks and humorous deceit that Ndella and Arame played to escape stigma, or Coura's multiple names and identities as she shifts between "going out at night" in Dakar and living with her mother in another city: by playing with people's perceptions of them, these women have found various ways to circumvent direct confrontation about their relationships.

Such craftiness creates room for dissidence, but adopting a trickster modality in itself is not enough to remain elusive. In a context in which disclosure and exposure increasingly characterise the Senegalese public debate, women's craftiness needs to be embedded in a moral economy of not-knowing. Rather than hiding dissident practices from others in an absolute sense, secrecy concerning one's dissident practices is a collective affair. Mariama's wedding to Yacine had to proceed with utmost care, given the regular mediatization of so-called gay weddings since 2008. When they were married, however, both wore a golden wedding ring. Mariama's mother had asked twice to whom Mariama had got married, but she never pushed for an answer when Mariama responded with a short, evasive "no one." While Mariama felt that her mother is aware of the nature of her relationship with Yacine, she also trusts that her mother will not confront her about it directly. Keeping this secret is a shared concern of Mariama and her mother, on whom public knowledge of her daughter's same-sex relationship would also reflect negatively.

Craftiness is not an innate capacity of women, but it relates to a set of skills that are developed, learned, and transmitted in women's networks in particular ways. In Chapter Three, I analysed mothering as a central practice for women to share resources and knowledge with each other. Mothers make their daughters streetwise, introducing and initiating them into a new milieu – whether this was a football team, the milieu of nightlife, or the city in general for newcomers. They house and feed daughters, and negotiated ties with women's biological families. The kinship bonds that women developed, are indicative of the spatial constraints that women face to live their supposedly wicked lives. In a context in which social control, of women in particular, is high, women have to create spaces away from family. Women's kinship bonds also shed light on the relevance of presumably "odd" connections between *ñi génn guddi* and *lesbiennes*. Although often considered to be living different lives and to have different concerns in terms of health and rights, my research shows that *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* often live together and share a *savoir vivre* in networks of kinship. Beyond the supposed boundaries between heterosexual sex work and same-sex love, *ñi génn guddi* and *lesbiennes* have developed meaningful oddkin bonds as a way to share knowledge and resources for survival in an urban context. Mame Diarra's "house of *kóoba*," where *ñi génn guddi*, *lesbiennes* and drug addicts live together, sharing rooms and resources, is an example. While the space of

the house offered the possibility to establish oddkin bonds, the substance of these bonds concerned the creation and transmission of a *savoir vivre*, a knowing how to live, together.

At the same time, the importance of such kinship bonds is not meant to suggest a harmonious peaceful community of so-called wicked women who always bond together to collectively confront marginalisation and precarity. Chapter Four revealed how the forms of sociality that women construct for a collective *savoir vivre* are fragile, affected by the broader societal context that criminalises and stigmatises their relationships or work, and by an economic context of scarcity of jobs and resources. Women's tight-knit networks, in which everything is shared – from scarce economic resources, to housing, as well as lovers – inevitably occasionally lead to jealousy and (violent) arguments, with women envious to keep and possess the little that is available to them. Women develop values of reciprocity and loyalty with regards to such sharing, and they can punish a (former) lover or a friend when they break these promises. In this chapter, I analysed how practices of violent exposure and humiliation, which women refer to as *wàcce*, has emerged among some *lesbienne* networks in a context of gender panic. The practice of *wàcce* engages a paradox: women need each other's care and support to be able to live their dissident lives, yet they also compete over the scarce resources that are available to them.

An analysis of why women would resort to *wàcce* in a context in which the consequences of being exposed as a *lesbienne* can be so serious has brought me to an understanding of the importance of feelings of honour and shame in shaping women's agency. Where the risk of tainting the family honour can be a reason for *féministes* to avoid speaking out too loudly for abortion rights or for sexual rights at all, for *lesbiennes* who have been stripped of their *sutura*, and who have thus been positioned outside of what are deemed honourable subjects already, shaming others through *wàcce* can seem the only way to restore or save their honour in their network. In other words: honour is an important element for defining and protecting one's social status, and once it is lost, attacking the honour of someone else can be a powerful way, if also the only way, to regain honour and to reposition oneself in one's social world. Stripped of their *sutura*, leading to their social positioning outside of what are deemed honourable subjects, women experience greater freedom to show their passions, compared to women of higher social status. *Wàcce* serves the negotiation of social hierarchies in these women's networks, where successful performances of superiority – in appearance, verbal wit, and physical domination – gain women respect and recognition in their network. By calling out someone else's wickedness, women who perform *wàcce* attempt to reposition themselves in a moral order by exposing someone else's immoral behaviour.

Women's diverse forms of agency demonstrate how vulnerability and strength go hand in hand in people's lives (Diabate 2020a). Like Serena Dankwa's "knowing women,"

“wicked” women display a capacity to value and pursue dissident desires as they navigate a context of hostility and constraints (Dankwa 2021, 74). This know-how to live well and to enjoy dissident practices circulates among women’s networks where they learn with and from each other. This transmission of *savoir vivre* enables so-called wicked women to develop the necessary multiple crafts of secrecy, elusiveness, and trickery to survive and live well under adverse conditions. But more than allowing women to survive in their own social environment, their craftiness also displays a potential to undermine the disciplinary agendas of religious and political leaders. Women embody and navigate multiple and supposedly conflicting identities, occupations, kinship attachments and social obligations as they craft a *savoir vivre*. This *savoir vivre* proposes a nuanced perspective on dissidence and the seemingly ever-increasing polarisation that gender and sexual dissidence appear to evoke across the world.

These different forms of agency that women enact in living dissident lives point in the direction of the influence of positionality for women’s capacity for action. Analysing the different ways in which *féministes*, *lesbiennes*, and *ñi génn guddi* cultivate ways to live gender dissident lives and push the boundaries of women’s gender roles, has led me to consider a number of factors that shape women’s “wicked” lives, which I discuss in the next section.

### **“A desire for freedom”**

*“C’était juste un désir de free. Un désir de liberté que je voulais exercer aussi. Un désir d’homme qui peut à tout moment imposer son point de vue à tout le monde* (F: It was just a desire for freedom. A desire for freedom that I wanted to have. A desire of a man who can impose his perspective on the world at any moment), Astou (Chapter Two) told me, as she recounted what had led her mother to kick her out of the house. She had refused to be bound to home, instead going out with friends and coming back at whatever time suited her. She did not listen to her mother, nor would she pick up the phone when people called her to ask where she was. Astou was aware that her behaviour – she also flirted openly with women on the streets – was considered unfeminine and indecorous. She nevertheless continued to live like this for a while, staying with friends whenever she was not welcome at home. When she met her current girlfriend Rokhaya years later, she had found a way to win back respect from her family, and to avoid people from questioning the nature of her relationship to Rokhaya. Wearing the veil, as well as Rokhaya’s marriage to a man, changed Astou’s appearance from a rebellious teenager to a respectable Muslim woman.

My interlocutors aspired to “freedom” in different ways and to different degrees, but they shared a longing to live their dissident desires. An exploration of how they sought ways and spaces to live their dissident lives, led me to distinguish three key factors that affect societal responses to women’s dissident practices, as well as women’s abilities to

live supposedly wicked lives. The first is social status. Women's abilities to deviate from gender norms without being stigmatised as wicked depends on their social status. Social and cultural capital enhance women's opportunities to speak up in the public domain. The *féministes* in this dissertation have access to institutional settings where norms are being debated. Their level of education and familiarity with public discourses allow them to take part in public debates about women's rights. Most of my other interlocutors, however, lack such social and cultural capital, and they depend on other networks and spaces to realise dissident lives, away from the often-virulent debates about female and dissident sexualities.

At the same time, high social status also comes with higher expectations of respectability and honour. The visibility of *féministes* in the public sphere, and their direct engagement with tense public debates about gender and sexuality, makes them vulnerable to accusations of supposed wickedness. Moreover, mostly coming from families with higher social status makes women responsible for upholding this status. The Wolof proverb *liggéeyu ndey añub doom* (the mother's work is the child's lunch), conveys how family status and honour are relational: a mother is directly judged for a child's misbehaviour. In Chapter One, I described how both Nguenar and Ramatoulaye took family honour and status into account in their lives as *féministes*. *Lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* who participated in this research mostly held lower social status. Although *lesbiennes* are most certainly under public scrutiny with rising anti-queer sentiments, a lower social status nevertheless enables many women to live their lives in relative quiet.

In addition to social status, two other factors are important in determining the space for living supposedly wicked lives. A second factor is financial autonomy. In many of my interlocutors' stories, financial autonomy appeared to be indispensable for being able to defy family expectations. Providing for one's family not only prevents family members from speaking out against the sources of income, as Ndella's story (Chapter Two) about her doing *mbaraan* revealed, but it also provides women with the means to move away from their families in an attempt to live their lives as they desire. The leeway that financial autonomy allows women to make their own decisions does not, however, set them free from family expectations and judgement.

The ways in which *ñi génn guddi* obtain financial autonomy through their dependency on men reveals the paradoxical freedom that dependency on others brings. This brings me to a third factor affecting women's agency to craft dissident lives: community embeddedness. The necessity for women to stick together was expressed by Adjé (Chapter Three) when she said that "*Si tu es pauvre, tu ne peux pas être gouine. C'est ça ma philosophie*" (F: If you're poor, you can't be a dyke. That's my philosophy). Poverty is not just economic, it is also social: a combination of economic means, physical appearance, moral values,

and social relations determine someone's social standing. In order to be able to make your own life choices, regardless of family expectations and societal norms, you need some degree of financial autonomy. But women like Adjii have also been able to sustain a so-called wicked life because of the oddkin bonds that they have created. By sharing resources, spaces, and *savoir vivre* to survive collectively, they forego economic and social poverty that would foreclose the possibilities to sustain sexually dissident lives.

Dependency on others, paradoxically, brings women some freedom. Although going out at night signals women's dependency on men to make ends meet (Foley and Dramé 2013), it also affords women some financial autonomy to provide for their families (Fanta, Chapter Two) and to postpone marriage (Coura, Chapter Two). This reveals how elusiveness provides room for dissident practices while women simultaneously fulfil their responsibilities and attachments to their families. Ironically, *ñi génn guddi* may experience more freedom in their lives than *féministes*, because of their stronger embeddedness in communities of oddkin. *Féministes* may lose some of this embeddedness in communities because of where they live – often removed from family because of their professional commitments in town and their financial means which allow them to rent apartments individually – but also because they make themselves known in the public sphere as *féministes*. Visibility renders vulnerable, and this is also visible in the ways in which the discourse on “homosexuality” has put (supposed) *lesbiennes* under more scrutiny and policing.

## The instability of freedom

Women's social positioning is always in motion, and an increasingly tense public debate about gender and (same-sex) sexualities can easily destabilise women's previously stable situation. Social status, financial autonomy, and community embeddedness are neither fixed in people's lives nor do they always suffice to protect women. In Chapters One and Three, I wrote about Meta, a former semi-professional football player who had become a mother for younger football players. Meta had proven to be a very responsible person, and she had worked hard to establish her own business. She had her own *boutique* from which she sold sports clothing, and she was financially autonomous. She was of tremendous help to many young women football players whom she mothered, and with her involvement with the Association des Footballeuses Professionnelles she had demonstrated a continuous commitment to the development of women's football in Senegal. She also had a girlfriend with whom she managed a discreet relationship. Her girlfriend was married, and she and her husband had a young child. Apparently, her husband had developed doubts about his wife's relationship with Meta for a while, and one day, when his doubts had been confirmed, he and his friends threatened to hurt Meta and divulge her story. She had seen too many examples of women who had got into troubles

with their families, and who had been forced to marry a man to solve their problems (see Chapter Four). Meta did not want to get married just to save her family's honour, so she decided to seek a way to leave Senegal. From the US, where she had been able to travel to with the help of a friend who sent her an invitation, she contacted me for help in filing an asylum application on the basis of prosecution for her sexual orientation.

While her flight allowed Meta to choose not to marry, she has given up intimate, proximate relationships with friends and loved ones in Senegal, and she has had to leave her girlfriend behind. With no realistic option of seeing each other again, their heartbreak must have been immense. Meta's status as a responsible person who worked hard for her own money, and who was visibly committed to ensuring better football futures for women in Senegal, was not enough to protect her from the risk of exposure as a *lesbienne*. Nor could Meta's strong embeddedness in women's football networks help her to overcome the risk of dishonouring her family if they would be informed about Meta's same-sex relationship.

Meta's story is an exception, and I do not tell it as a way to argue about the impossibility of living *lesbienne* lives in Senegal. Most women stay in Senegal, and they do find ways to live dissident lives, despite the many constraints that they may face. The women in this dissertation have demonstrated this creative agency to navigate gender and sexual dissidence while maintaining relationships with family. But Meta's story does reveal the looming threat of becoming exposed as *lesbienne* in Senegal, and what the ultimate consequences of becoming "known" as a *lesbienne*, for which women face humiliation and shame, can be. Meta's story is, furthermore, illustrative of the unpredictability of life and of the instability of women's social positioning.

With growing anti-queer sentiments and panic about the supposed moral decadence that seeps into Senegalese society, it is tempting to consider the stories of gender and sexual dissidents like Meta as representing victimhood only. The media representation of *lesbiennes* paints a frightening picture of witch hunts and public exposure of people who are accused of being *lesbienne* or *gay*. Moreover, stigma, violence, and the legal position of LGBTQI+ persons dominate research and policy documents on the situation of *gays*, *lesbiennes*, and other dissidents in many contexts, including Senegal. Much of the knowledge on same-sex sexualities in Africa is developed in NGOs and policy research, which engage with questions of sexual and reproductive health and rights (Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Hendriks and Spronk 2020). This imaginary conveys that Senegal is no place for *lesbiennes* or *gays*. This dissertation has suggested otherwise. In order to do justice to the variety of experiences of sexually and gender dissident lives in Africa, and not just those pertaining to anti-queer violence for example, ethnographic research is important. Instead of understanding so-called wicked women as victims of patriarchy and heterosexism only, this study

diversifies our understanding of women's lives by attending to the myriad ways in which they have shaped, and continue to shape, their lives.

In their own lives, women's positioning shifts as they relate to different spaces and networks of people. My interlocutors easily switched between words like *jump*, *sexy*, *lesbienne*, *ñi génn guddi*, *mbaraaneuse*, and *kóoba* when describing their gendered and sexual sense of self. This reflects the relationality of such categories and the inability of any of such terms to reflect their personhood fully. To better understand how women experience discourses of gendered and sexual morality, and to grasp how women shape and understand their own dissident practices, we need to approach the question of gender in its intersections with sexuality and social status, among other things, and to avoid a fixation on separate identities such as “lesbians” or “sex workers.” This will help to challenge assumptions of sexually and gender dissident women in Senegal as only victims in a heteropatriarchal context, and to challenge assumptions about sexual identities and what they mean for the lives that unfold. Mindfulness of the indeterminacy of supposed identity categories is a first step to take.

Studying different “groups” of women together also has implications for human rights interventions. Sexual and reproductive health and rights should not be approached as singular issues, detached from other social issues and relationships. Sexuality is relationally experienced, and sexual and romantic relationships are often established, sustained, and broken in a collective (Dankwa 2021). The dynamics within women's oddkin bonds are so central to how women experience and shape their dissident practices that individual approaches to sexual and reproductive health and rights do not correspond well with how people approach questions of sexuality themselves. We cannot really understand the lives of *lesbiennes* in Senegal if we do not explore how they form bonds of kinship with *ñi génn guddi*. And we cannot understand the work of *féministes* in Senegal if we do not compare the constraints that they face in their activism to the stigmatisation of other supposedly wicked women.

The different ways in which women navigate gender and sexual dissidence – from *féministes* who speak out in the public sphere, to women's craftiness to remain elusive and ambiguous, and to the development and transmission of *savoir vivre* in networks of *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi*, and, finally, the violent exposure of women who *wacce* another woman when they have nothing to lose and everything to gain – reveal the situatedness and relationality of agency. Supposedly wicked women develop and maintain sites of socialisation – including the “house of *kóoba*,” the football field, and through mothering practices – which allow them to get by. Their knowledge of how to live well (*savoir vivre*) reminds us that we cannot do without each other, even if we do not get along.





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# Summary

This dissertation analyses women's gender and sexual dissidence in relation to social transformations in Senegal. The Senegalese public discourse is characterised by "gender panic": a broad public concern with women's unruly practices, and sexuality in particular, that emerges as social transformations bring about shifts in gender relations. As a result, sexualities are virulently policed, and particularly "homosexuality" is brought to the public attention as a problem that jeopardises Senegalese supposedly traditional values and ways of living. Through a focus on women's everyday lives, this dissertation explores how women shape their lives while navigating public debates, gender panic, and the policing of gender norms that results from this panic in Senegal.

This thesis follows a qualitative methodology, and it draws upon ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2022 with three groups of women who, in one way or the other, transgress Senegalese gender norms: *féministes* (F: feminists), *lesbiennes* (F: lesbians) and *ñi génn guddi* (W: those who go out at night, that is who engage in commercial sex). By bringing together three groups of women who are differently positioned in society, and who have consequently largely been studied separately, this dissertation challenges the compartmentalisation of research that is common in gender and sexuality studies. Particularly in a time of right-wing nationalism and populist rhetoric that has appropriated identity politics as a way of pitting groups against one another, undoing the fragmentation of society into isolated, supposedly incompatible identities and groups is crucial. The analytical concept "wicked" helps in this regard. It brings together a variety of women whose behaviour has come to be seen as a threat to the social and moral order. It shows how different acts of dissidence, such as same-sex love, commercial sex, or vocally contesting particularly gendered norms such as *sutura* (W: discretion, privacy, modesty) and *muñ* (W: enduring, persisting silently in the face of hardship), coalesce and bring about forms of agency whereby the supposed differences between these women are sidestepped. The term "wicked" allows for a deeper understanding of women's positioning as they respond to, but also as they generate social transformations.

In four empirical chapters, this dissertation sheds light on the many different ways in which supposedly wicked women craft ways to live their dissident lives. It starts and ends with the role of the public sphere in delimiting women's agency at the precipice of supposed wickedness.

Chapter One explores how *féministes* give shape to their agency in the public sphere in a context of gender panic. This context, and particularly the virulent anti-queer debates of the last years, highlights new tensions concerning women's agency. From these debates emerges a picture that, despite an increased visibility of *féministes* and a growing presence of women in the public sphere in positions of leadership, there is little room for a

questioning of gender and sexual norms. Female sexualities remain seriously policed, and the efforts of women to acquire the right to abortion in cases of incest or rape are heavily combated. The domain of sexual rights proves to be a contentious terrain, and anti-queer sentiments in particular mark the precipice of supposed wickedness in the current era.

Because for most Senegalese women publicly debating questions of gender and sexuality is neither a possibility, nor a desire that they hold, Chapter Two zooms in on women who largely avoid the public sphere as they shape their dissident lives. Instead of *ceasing* the practice of *sutura*, they *seize* its affordances to create and navigate space for their dissident lives. This Chapter foregrounds the experiences of *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* and how they seek space to live their dissident lives. It demonstrates how women craft liveable lives for themselves through the use of trickery, secrecy and ambiguity.

Chapter Three expands this idea of women's craftiness by arguing that this is learned and developed in conjunction with others. It explores how so-called wicked women create and transmit a *savoir vivre*, a knowing how to live, together in a challenging urban context. This chapter analyses women's kinship bonds as a site of knowledge production. Although often considered to be living different lives and to have different concerns in terms of health and rights, this chapter shows that *lesbiennes* and *ñi génn guddi* often live together and share a *savoir vivre* in networks of kinship. Despite the importance of such social relations and kinship bonds for women to survive together amid economic precarity and societal expectations, their relations are not free from conflict.

Chapter Four reveals how the forms of sociality that women construct for a collective *savoir vivre* are fragile, affected by the broader societal context that criminalises and stigmatises their relationships or work, and by an economic context of scarcity of jobs and resources. Women's tight-knit networks, in which everything is shared – from scarce economic resources, to housing, as well as lovers – inevitably occasionally lead to jealousy and (violent) arguments. Scarcity breeds jealousy, and some women are envious to keep and possess the little that is available to them. This Chapter analyses how practices of violent exposure and humiliation, which women refer to as *wacce*, has emerged among some *lesbienne* networks. The practice of *wacce* engages a paradox: women need each other's care and support to be able to live their dissident lives, yet they also compete over the scarce resources that are available to them.

Bringing together the experiences of a diversity of women sheds light on how different forms of agency emerge, depending on women's social positionalities. Women from all different walks of life are affected by gender normativity and gender panic, but the degree to which they are under scrutiny, and the ways in which their behaviour is judged, differs. This dissertation identifies three key factors that affect societal responses to women's

dissident practices, as well as women's abilities to live supposedly wicked lives: social status, financial autonomy and embeddedness in communities.

Women's abilities to deviate from gender norms without being stigmatised as wicked depends on their social status. Social and cultural capital enhance women's opportunities to speak up in the public domain. Financial autonomy, too, is indispensable for being able to defy family expectations. The leeway that financial autonomy allows women to make their own decisions does not, however, set them free from family expectations and judgement. To sustain a so-called wicked life, women are also firmly embedded in communities. By sharing resources, spaces, and *savoir vivre* to survive collectively, women forego economic and social poverty that would foreclose the possibilities to sustain sexually dissident lives.

The transmission of this *savoir vivre* enables women to develop the necessary multiple crafts of secrecy, elusiveness, and trickery to survive and live well under adverse conditions. But more than surviving, their craftiness also displays a potential to undermine the disciplinary agendas of religious and political leaders. Women embody and navigate multiple and supposedly conflicting identities, occupations, kinship attachments and social obligations as they craft a collective *savoir vivre*. This *savoir vivre* proposes a nuanced perspective on dissidence and the seemingly ever-increasing polarisation that gender and sexual dissidence appear to evoke across the world. Women's knowledge of how to live well (*savoir vivre*) reminds us that we cannot do without each other, even if we do not get along.

# Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift analyseert gender- en seksuele dissidentie van vrouwen in relatie tot sociale veranderingen in Senegal. Het hedendaagse Senegalese publieke discours wordt gekenmerkt door “genderpaniek”: breed gedeeld bezorgdheid over onhandelbare vrouwen en hun seksualiteit in het bijzonder, die ontstaat op het moment dat sociale veranderingen verschuivingen teweegbrengen in genderrelaties. Als gevolg hiervan worden seksualiteiten op vijandige wijze gepolitiseerd en wordt vooral “homoseksualiteit” onder de aandacht van het publiek gebracht als een probleem dat zogenaamd traditionele Senegalese waarden en levenswijzen in gevaar brengt. Met een focus op de dagelijkse levens van vrouwen onderzoekt deze dissertatie hoe vrouwen hun levens vormgeven terwijl ze laveren tussen publieke debatten, genderpaniek en de verschillende manieren waarop gendernormen worden gehandhaafd als gevolg van deze paniek in Senegal.

Deze dissertatie is gebaseerd op een kwalitatieve methodologie en tien maanden etnografisch veldwerk uitgevoerd tussen 2020 en 2022, met drie groepen vrouwen die op de een of andere manier de Senegalese gendernormen overschrijden: *féministes* (F: feministen), *lesbiennes* (F: lesbiennes) en *ñi génn guddi* (W: zij die ‘s nachts uitgaan, dat wil zeggen die seks verkopen). Dit onderzoek brengt drie groepen vrouwen samen die niet alleen verschillend gepositioneerd zijn, maar die dientengevolge ook vaak apart van elkaar bestudeerd worden in studies over gender en seksualiteit. In een tijd waarin rechts nationalisme en populistische retoriek zich identiteitspolitiek hebben toegeëigend als een manier om groepen tegen elkaar op te zetten, is het cruciaal om deze opdeling van de samenleving in zogenaamd geïsoleerde en onverenigbare identiteiten ongedaan te maken. Het analytische concept “*wicked*” (E: slecht) helpt hierbij. Het brengt een verscheidenheid aan vrouwen samen wier gedrag is gaan gelden als een bedreiging voor de sociale en morele orde. Het laat zien hoe verschillende daden van dissidentie, zoals liefde tussen mensen van hetzelfde geslacht, commerciële seks, of het openlijk betwisten van gender gebonden normen zoals *sutura* (W: discretie, bescheidenheid) en *muñ* (W: volharden, zwijgend volhouden bij moeilijkheden), samenkomen en vormen van *agency* teweegbrengen waarbij de veronderstelde verschillen tussen deze vrouwen worden betwist.

In vier empirische hoofdstukken laat dit proefschrift de vele verschillende manieren waarop “*wicked*” vrouwen manieren vinden om hun dissidente levens te leiden. Het begint en eindigt met de rol van de publieke sfeer in het stellen van grenzen aan de *agency* van vrouwen voor zij als “*wicked*” worden bestempeld.

Hoofdstuk één onderzoekt hoe *féministes* vormgeven aan hun *agency* in het publieke domein binnen een context van genderpaniek. Deze context, en in het bijzonder de vijandige *anti-queer* debatten van de afgelopen jaren, benadrukt dat er nieuwe spanningen zijn met betrekking tot de *agency* van vrouwen. Uit deze debatten komt het beeld naar voren dat, ondanks de toegenomen zichtbaarheid van *féministes* en de groeiende aanwezigheid van

vrouwen in leidinggevende posities in het publieke domain, er weinig ruimte is voor het bediscussiëren van gender- en seksuele normen. Vrouwelijke seksualiteit wordt nog steeds streng gecontroleerd en de pogingen van vrouwen om het recht op abortus te krijgen in geval van incest of verkrachting worden zwaar bestreden. Het domein van seksuele rechten blijkt een controversieel terrein te zijn, en anti-queer sentimenten in het bijzonder zorgen ervoor dat niet-heteroseksualiteit vrouwen snel het stempel “wicked” oplevert.

Omdat voor de meeste Senegalese vrouwen het publiekelijk debatteren over kwesties van gender en seksualiteit mogelijk noch wenselijk is, gaat Hoofdstuk twee dieper in op vrouwen die het publieke debat grotendeels vermijden om hun dissidente levens vorm te geven. In plaats van de norm van *sutura* te verwerpen, gebruiken ze de norm om ruimte te creëren en te navigeren voor hun dissidente levens. Dit hoofdstuk belicht de ervaringen van *lesbiennes* en *ñi génn guddi* die ruimte zoeken om hun dissidente levens te leiden. Het laat zien hoe vrouwen door middel van listen, geheimhouding en dubbelzinnigheid een leefbaar leven voor zichzelf weten te creëren.

Hoofdstuk drie breidt dit idee van de vindingrijkheid van vrouwen uit door te beargumenteren dat deze vernuftigheid wordt aangeleerd en ontwikkeld samen met anderen. Centraal staat hoe “wicked” vrouwen samen *savoir vivre* (F: kennis en kunde hoe te leven) creëren en overdragen binnen hun uitdagende context in stedelijk Senegal. Dit hoofdstuk analyseert de verwantschapsbanden tussen vrouwen als een plaats van kennisproductie. Hoewel vaak wordt gedacht dat *lesbiennes* en *ñi génn guddi* verschillende levens leiden en verschillende belangen hebben op het gebied van hun gezondheid en rechten, laat dit hoofdstuk zien dat *lesbiennes* en *ñi génn guddi* vaak samenleven en *savoir vivre* delen in verwantschapsnetwerken. Ondanks het belang van dergelijke sociale relaties om samen te overleven onder economisch precarie omstandigheden en maatschappelijke verwachtingen, zijn hun relaties niet vrij van conflicten.

Hoofdstuk vier laat zien hoe fragiel de vormen van socialiteit zijn die vrouwen samen creëren. Ze worden beïnvloed door de bredere maatschappelijke context die hun relaties of werk criminaliseert en stigmatiseert, en door een economische context van schaarse banen en middelen. De hechte netwerken van vrouwen waarin alles wordt gedeeld – van schaarse economische middelen tot huisvesting en geliefden – leiden onvermijdelijk af en toe tot jaloezie en (gewelddadige) ruzie. Schaarste is een voedingsbodem voor jaloezie, en sommige vrouwen proberen het weinige dat ze tot hun beschikking hebben te behouden en te bezitten. In dit hoofdstuk wordt geanalyseerd hoe geweld, vernedering en het onthullen van relaties tussen vrouwen van hetzelfde geslacht – een combinatie van praktijken die vrouwen *wacce* noemen – zijn ontstaan binnen sommige netwerken van *lesbiennes*. De praktijk van *wacce* laat een paradox zien: vrouwen hebben elkaars zorg en steun nodig om hun dissidente levens te kunnen leiden, maar ze concurreren ook om de schaarse middelen die ze tot hun beschikking hebben.



Door de ervaringen van verschillende groepen vrouwen samen te brengen, geeft dit proefschrift inzicht in het ontstaan van verschillende vormen van *agency*, afhankelijk van de sociale positie van vrouwen. Alle vrouwen worden beïnvloed door gendernormen en genderpaniek, maar de mate waarin ze onder de loep worden genomen en de manieren waarop hun gedrag wordt beoordeeld, verschillen. Dit proefschrift identificeert drie sleutelfactoren die van invloed zijn op de maatschappelijke reacties op dissidente praktijken van vrouwen en op de mogelijkheden van vrouwen om zogenaamd *wicked* levens te leiden: sociale status, financiële autonomie en inbedding in gemeenschappen.

Het vermogen van vrouwen om af te wijken van de gendernormen zonder gestigmatiseerd te worden als “*wicked*”, hangt af van hun sociale status. Sociaal en cultureel kapitaal geven vrouwen de mogelijkheid om hun stem te laten horen in het publieke domein. Daarnaast is ook financiële autonomie onontbeerlijk om in te kunnen gaan tegen de verwachtingen van familieleden. De speelruimte die financiële autonomie vrouwen geeft om hun eigen beslissingen te nemen, betekent echter niet dat zij helemaal vrij zijn van familiale verwachtingen en oordelen. Om een zogenaamd *wicked* leven te kunnen leiden, zijn vrouwen ook stevig ingebed in gemeenschappen. Door het delen van middelen, ruimtes en *savoir vivre* om samen te overleven, verkleinen vrouwen de economische en sociale armoede die het onmogelijk zouden maken om een dissident leven te leiden.

Door de overdracht van *savoir vivre* tussen vrouwen onderling, kunnen vrouwen geheimhouding, ongrijpbaarheid en het creatief verzinnen van listjes leren om zich staande te houden in een moeilijke context. Behalve dat vrouwen hiermee hun eigen levens kunnen vormgeven, vormt de vindingrijkheid van vrouwen ook een antwoord op de agenda's van religieuze en politieke leiders die hun gedrag proberen te beteugelen. Door verschillende identiteiten, beroepen en verwantschapsverbanden voor zichzelf te creëren, geven ze vorm aan een *savoir vivre*. Dit *savoir vivre* biedt een genuanceerd perspectief op dissidentie en de schijnbaar alsmaar toenemende polarisatie die gender en seksuele dissidentie over de hele wereld lijken op te roepen. De kennis van vrouwen over hoe goed te leven (*savoir vivre*) laat ons zien dat we niet zonder elkaar kunnen, ook als we niet met elkaar overweg kunnen.

# Résumé

Cette thèse analyse les formes féminines de dissidence sexuelle et de genre en lien avec les transformations sociales que connaît le Sénégal. Le discours public sénégalais contemporain est caractérisé par une « panique de genre », c'est-à-dire par des préoccupations largement partagées concernant les femmes indisciplinées, et leur sexualité en particulier, qui surgissent au moment où les changements sociaux entraînent des modifications des rapports de genre. Par conséquent, les sexualités sont surveillées avec virulence et l'« homosexualité » en particulier est portée à l'attention du public comme un problème qui compromettrait les valeurs et modes de vie sénégalais prétendument traditionnels. En se concentrant sur la vie quotidienne des femmes, cette thèse explore la manière dont elles façonnent leurs vies en naviguant entre les débats publics, la panique de genre et le contrôle sur les normes de genre provoqué par cette panique au Sénégal.

Cette thèse s'appuie sur une méthodologie qualitative et dix mois de terrain ethnographique menés entre 2020 et 2022, auprès de trois groupes de femmes qui transgressent d'une manière ou d'une autre les normes de genre sénégalaises : des féministes, des lesbiennes et des *ni génn guddi* (W : celles qui sortent la nuit, c'est-à-dire qui s'adonnent au commerce du sexe). En réunissant trois groupes de femmes qui sont positionnées différemment dans la société et qui pour cette raison ont largement été étudiées séparément, cette thèse interroge les cloisonnements des études sur le genre et la sexualité. À une époque où le nationalisme de droite et la rhétorique populiste se sont approprié les politiques identitaires pour opposer les groupes les uns aux autres, il paraît crucial de défaire la fragmentation de la société en identités et groupes supposément isolés et incompatibles. Le concept analytique de « *wicked* » (A : mauvais) y contribue. Il rassemble une variété de femmes dont le comportement est perçu comme une menace pour l'ordre social et moral. Il montre comment différents actes de dissidence, tels que l'amour entre personnes du même sexe, le commerce du sexe, ou la contestation ouverte des normes liées au genre, telles que le *sutura* (W : discrétion, réserve, modestie) et le *muñ* (W : endurer, persister en silence face aux épreuves), se rejoignent et produisent des formes d'agencéité à travers lesquelles les différences supposées entre ces femmes sont dépassées. La notion de « *wicked* » permet une compréhension plus approfondie de la position des femmes, à la fois dans leur manière de répondre aux transformations sociales et dans l'étude de leur rôle actif dans ces transformations.

En quatre chapitres empiriques, cette thèse met en lumière les différentes façons dont les femmes supposément « *wicked* » élaborent les moyens de vivre leurs vies dissidentes. Elle commence et se termine par le rôle de la sphère publique dans la définition des limites de l'agencéité des femmes et du seuil de la transgression.

Le premier chapitre explore la manière dont les féministes façonnent leur agencéité dans la sphère publique dans un contexte de panique de genre. Ce contexte, et en particulier les virulents débats *anti-queer* de ces dernières années, met en lumière de nouvelles tensions concernant l'agencéité féminine. Il ressort de ces débats que, malgré la visibilité accrue des féministes et la présence croissante de femmes à des postes de direction dans la sphère publique, il y a peu d'espace pour discuter des normes sexuelles et de genre. La sexualité féminine demeure étroitement contrôlée et les tentatives des femmes pour obtenir le droit à l'avortement en cas d'inceste ou de viol sont fortement combattues. Le domaine des droits sexuels s'avère être un terrain miné, et les attitudes *anti-queer* en particulier font planer le risque du stigmate de la transgression.

Puisque pour la plupart des femmes sénégalaises débattre publiquement des questions de genre et de sexualité n'est ni possible ni souhaitable, le chapitre deux se centre sur le cas de femmes qui évitent largement la visibilité alors qu'elles façonnent leurs vies dissidentes. Au lieu d'abandonner la pratique du *sutura*, elles en saisissent les possibilités pour créer et naviguer dans un espace dédié à leurs vies dissidentes. Ce chapitre met en avant les expériences des lesbiennes et des *ñi génn guddi* et la manière dont elles cherchent un espace pour mener leurs vies dissidentes. Il montre comment les femmes parviennent à se créer des vies vivables grâce à la ruse, au secret et à l'ambiguïté.

Le troisième chapitre prolonge l'idée d'une ingéniosité des femmes en affirmant que celle-ci s'apprend et se développe auprès des autres. Il se concentre sur la manière dont les femmes « *wicked* » créent et transmettent un savoir-vivre dans un contexte urbain difficile. Ce chapitre analyse les réseaux de parenté des femmes en tant que lieu de production de connaissances. Alors que l'on pense souvent que les lesbiennes et les *ñi génn guddi* mènent des vies différentes et ont des intérêts distincts en matière de santé et de droits, ce chapitre montre qu'elles vivent souvent ensemble et partagent leur savoir-vivre au sein de réseaux de parenté. Malgré l'importance de ces relations sociales pour survivre à plusieurs dans un contexte de précarité économique et de pressions sociales, ces relations ne sont pas exemptes de conflits.

Le chapitre quatre révèle la fragilité des formes de socialité que ces femmes construisent. Elles sont affectées par un contexte social plus large qui criminalise et stigmatise leurs relations ou leur travail, ainsi que par un contexte économique caractérisé par la rareté des emplois et des ressources. Les réseaux étroits des femmes, dans lesquels tout est partagé – allant des maigres ressources économiques au logement et aux amants – conduisent inévitablement à des jalousies occasionnelles et à des querelles (violentes). La rareté engendre la jalousie, et certaines femmes cherchent à préserver et à posséder le peu dont elles disposent. Ce chapitre analyse comment des pratiques d'exposition violente et d'humiliation, appelées *wacce* par les femmes, ont émergé au sein de certains réseaux

lesbiens. La pratique du *wācce* implique un paradoxe : les femmes ont besoin des soins et du soutien des autres pour être en mesure de vivre leur vie dissidente, mais elles se disputent également les rares ressources à leur portée.

En rassemblant les expériences de différents groupes de femmes, cette thèse donne à voir l'émergence de diverses formes d'agencéité, qui varient en fonction de la position sociale des femmes. Les femmes de tous les milieux sont affectées par les normes de genre et la panique liée au genre, mais le degré de surveillance qu'elles subissent et les façons dont leur comportement est jugé différent. Cette thèse identifie trois facteurs clés qui influencent les réponses sociales émises face aux pratiques dissidentes des femmes et la capacité de celles-ci à mener des vies prétendument transgressives : le statut social, l'autonomie financière et l'intégration dans des communautés.

La capacité des femmes à s'écarter des normes de genre sans être étiquetées comme transgressives dépend de leur statut social. Le capital social et culturel permet aux femmes de faire entendre leur voix dans le débat public. En outre, l'autonomie financière est également indispensable pour aller à l'encontre des attentes des membres de la famille. Cependant, la marge de manœuvre que l'autonomie financière donne aux femmes pour prendre leurs propres décisions ne signifie pas qu'elles sont complètement libérées des attentes et des jugements familiaux. Afin d'être en mesure de mener une vie perçue comme transgressive, les femmes sont aussi fermement ancrées dans des communautés. En partageant les ressources, les espaces et le savoir-vivre pour survivre collectivement, les femmes défont la pauvreté économique et sociale qui rendrait impossible une vie dissidente.

Grâce à la transmission de ce savoir-vivre, les femmes apprennent les multiples compétences permettant de manier le secret, de se faire insaisissables et d'élaborer des ruses pour survivre et vivre leurs vies face à l'adversité. Mais au-delà de la survie, l'ingéniosité de ces femmes leur offre aussi la possibilité de saper les agendas disciplinaires des leaders religieux et politiques. Les femmes incarnent et naviguent entre de multiples identités, occupations, attaches familiales et obligations sociales supposément contradictoires, tout en élaborant un savoir-vivre collectif. Ce savoir-vivre offre une perspective nuancée sur la dissidence et la polarisation apparemment croissante que la dissidence sexuelle et de genre semble susciter à travers le monde. Le savoir des femmes en matière de conduite de leurs propres vies nous rappelle que nous ne pouvons pas vivre les uns sans les autres, même si nous ne nous entendons pas.

# Curriculum Vitae

Loes Oudenhuijsen (1994, Sint Maarten) attended high school at the Koninklijke Scholengemeenschap in Apeldoorn. She holds a bachelor (*cum laude*) in International Development Studies from Wageningen University, and a research master (*cum laude*) in African Studies from Leiden University. Loes works at the intersection of African Studies, anthropology, and gender and sexuality studies. Her PhD research, which commenced in 2019, built upon research she conducted for her MA studies on the lives of young same-sex desiring women in Senegal. The PhD project was carried out at the African Studies Centre, Leiden University (ASCL). At the ASCL, Loes was part of the Graduate Programme in African Studies.

During her PhD, she taught multiple courses in the MA programme African Studies, as well as delivering guest lectures and teaching at summer schools at other universities in the Netherlands and abroad. Loes is board member at Lova, the Netherlands Association for Feminist Anthropology and Gender Studies. She is editor-in-chief of Lova's annual peer-reviewed journal, and she is a member of its working group Safety in the Field.



The past years have seen an increasing attention to female sexualities and “homosexuality” in the Senegalese public sphere. This putting into discourse of female and dissident sexualities runs against cultural expectations and values of discretion around matters of sexuality, and it signals a growing anxiety with the loss of control over (women’s) bodies and sexualities. This dissertation analyses women’s agency in a context that is characterised by broad public concern with women’s unruly practices and sexuality in particular that emerges as social transformations bring about shifts in gender hierarchies and -relations. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted with *fémnistes* (feminists), *lesbiennes* (lesbians), and *ñi génn guddi* (those who go out at night, who engage in commercial sex), the focus is on how women shape their everyday lives while navigating public debates and the gender norms and expectations that underlie them. It sheds light on how gender dissident women craft ways to live their lives by drawing upon trickery, secrecy and ambiguity. In the process of navigating heteronormative public debates, family expectations and moral obligations, women furthermore cultivate forms of sociality which ground them in social networks and enable them to sustain dissident lives. Exploring the shifting articulations between gender panic, gender norms, and women’s agency, this study expands our understanding of gender and sexuality studies in Africa through the figure of so-called wicked women.



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