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

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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.¹ 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.² 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.

¹ 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.

² 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).³ 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

³ 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, Adjé 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).⁴ 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

⁴ 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.⁵ 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.

⁵ 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).⁶ 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

⁶ 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 *Ikône* 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.



[^] 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).⁷ During two three-month fieldwork stays, I lived with

⁷ 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.⁸ 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

⁸ 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.⁹ 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

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰Interview 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.