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The Netherlands

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

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### **Citation**

Oudenhuijsen, L. W. (2025, March 5). *Situating "wicked" women: gender panic and savoir vivre in urban Senegal*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4196578>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **CHAPTER 1**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The expansion of the public sphere in Senegal

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

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

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

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

## The development of feminist organisations in Senegal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## *Generations of féministes*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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