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Cultural De-colonization versus Liberal Approaches to Abortion in Africa: The Politics of Representation and Voice

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Abstract

Political discussions on abortion in Africa take place in the context of most countries having restrictive abortion legislation and high levels of unsafe abortion. In this paper two major political positions regarding abortion in Africa: a de-colonisation approach based on a homogenized view of “culture”, and a liberal approach based on “choice” and rights are outlined. Using the Questions and Answers sessions of a United Nations event on maternal health in Africa as an exemplar of these positions, the paper argues that neither approach is emancipatory in the African context. A de-colonisation approach that uses static and homogenized understanding of ‘culture’ risks engaging in a politics of representation that potentially silences the “Other” (in this case women who terminate their pregnancies) and glosses over complexities and multiple power relations that exist on the continent. A liberal approach, premised on choice and reproductive rights, risks foregrounding individual women’s agency at the expense of contextual dynamics, including the conditions that create unsupportable pregnancies. The paper argues for a grounded reproductive justice perspective that draws on the insights of the reproductive justice movement, but grounds these notions within the African philosophy of *Hunhu/Ubuntu*. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2018; 22[2]: 49-59).

Keywords: Hunhu/Ubuntu, choice, reproductive justice, agency, women

Résumé

Les discussions politiques sur l'avortement en Afrique ont lieu dans le contexte de la plupart des pays ayant une législation restrictive sur l'avortement et des taux élevés d'avortement à risque. Dans cet article, deux positions politiques majeures concernant l'avortement en Afrique: une approche de la décolonisation basée sur une vision homogénéisée de la «culture» et une approche libérale basée sur le «choix» et les droits sont esquissées. En utilisant les sessions ‘Questions’ et ‘Réponses’ d'un événement des Nations Unies sur la santé maternelle en Afrique comme un exemple de ces positions, le document affirme qu'aucune de ces approches n'est émancipatrice dans le contexte africain. Une approche de décolonisation qui utilise une compréhension statique et homogène de la «culture» risque de s'engager dans une politique de représentation qui pourrait faire taire l'Autre (dans ce cas, les femmes qui terminent leurs grossesses) et passer sous silence les complexités et les relations de pouvoir existantes sur le continent. Une approche libérale, fondée sur le choix et les droits en matière de procréation, risque de mettre en avant l'action individuelle des femmes au détriment de la dynamique contextuelle, y compris les conditions qui créent des grossesses insupportables. Le document plaide en faveur d'une perspective fondée sur la justice de la reproduction qui s'appuie sur les idées du mouvement de la justice de la reproduction, mais fonde ces notions dans la philosophie africaine de *Hunhu / Ubuntu*. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2018; 22[2]: 49-59).

Mots-clés: Hunhu/Ubuntu, choix, justice reproduction, agence, femmes

Introduction

Abortion is a contentious subject in Africa. Many countries have legal restrictions on abortion provision or ban abortion completely. There are

high levels of social stigma associated with women who terminate their pregnancies¹. Deaths as a result of unsafe abortions are high, estimated at more than 16,000 per year². Given these circumstances, there are several political debates

regarding the status and meaning of abortion on the continent. This paper explores two political positions regarding abortion in Africa: a de-colonialist approach premised on a homogenized view of culture; and a liberal approach based on “choice” and rights. These positions are neatly exemplified in statements made in a Questions and Answers session after a United Nations event entitled ‘Best practices for maternal health in Africa’, hosted by the Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations and sponsored by the Campaign for Life Coalition, REAL Women of Canada, and the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children. Danish Member of Parliament, Mette Gjerskov, began the exchange by drawing on liberal notions of choice³. Obianuju Ekeocha, founder of Culture of Life Africa, a pro-life organization based in England, then argued that abortion is un-African and that the call for safe abortion from European countries amounts to neo-colonisation³. The paper argues that neither position is useful in providing emancipatory contexts for women in terms of reproductive issues, in particular the decision to terminate a pregnancy or take the pregnancy to term.

In the following the features of this exchange is re-produced and discussed. Some basic facts about abortion in Africa are then presented. The paper outlines why neither of these positions are emancipatory approaches to abortion in Africa. The paper traces how linking abortion with colonialism has been successful in opposing ‘abortion rights’ by seeing abortion as a Western project that violates African traditions and culture. This approach is problematized and shown to be in abortion debates were a de-colonisation position homogenizes culture risks losing the “woman”. The paper’s argument centres on Tamale’s warning of homogenizing African women and the inherent politics of representation i.e. who speaks for whom and the politics of voice i.e. who should speak⁴. The paper explores how culture talk is used to deny safe abortion, and how those who claim to speak in the name of the “silenced other” (the African woman) are susceptible to being “co-opted” in the continued oppression of African women.

The paper argues, further, that the liberal approach represented by Mette Gjerskov, while successful in many Western contexts in advocating for liberal abortion legislation and provision, is also problematic. The limitations of this position have, of course, been recognized in feminist literature emanating from Western countries. It nevertheless remains the mainstay of much effort to change restrictive abortion legislation in African contexts. Finally, the paper advocates for an African feminism that is grounded in pluralities and multiplicities of the lived experience of African women⁵. The paper speaks of the possibilities contained in a reproductive justice approach that draws from indigenous notions such as *Ubuntu/Hunhu*.

The exchange

The Question and Answer session following the United Nations event mentioned above was introduced by Archbishop Bernardito Auza³. He acknowledged a delegate, which then resulted in the exchange replicated below:

Mette Gjerskov:

Thank you ... my name is Mette Gjerskov. I am from the, uh, Danish parliament. I am a former minister, and, um, first allow me to, to express my respect for all the work you do for, for women all over the world and, of course, Africa. Um, I was a bit provoked by the thought of neo-colonialism. Being from Europe, uh, of course, this hurts me, and, uh, so I would like to share a bit, because I have been to Africa, uh, and I know there are different countries and I've been to Zimbabwe and Mali and Tunisia and, uh, Tanzania and Kenya and Rwanda and a lot of African countries, and I've spoken to a lot of African women. And, and, and my lesson learned from being from a colony, colonialistic, uh, uh, society is do no harm. Allow people to make their own choices ((applause)). And when I've been to Africa, I've spoken to a lot of women and some

women want this and some women want that, but I think we should allow them to decide for themselves ((applause)). And that is, that includes freely decide over their own body, their own sexuality, when and how many babies they want, if they want contraception, if they want abortion. We don't have to put it on anybody else ((applause)). So, so, if you want to make sure that you don't start a neo-colonisation, you let people make their own choices, decide over their own body. Thank you very much ((applause)).

[Obianuju Ekeocha, who is a member of the panel, then asked to respond to this input].

Obianuju Ekeocha:

Sorry I'd like to just address, I'd like to address, uh, the lady who had spoken, the Danish lady who had spoken about, uh, comparing African women not having the right to choose what to do with her body ((makes hand gesture indicating quotation marks)) and it being colonisation. It's actually quite amazing how you were able to kind of twist that into shape, uh, to, to that thought. But I must say this to you: um, I am from a tribe called the Igbo tribe in Nigeria. If I tried to translate in my native tongue what it means for a women to choose what to do with her body, I couldn't. Most of the African native languages don't even have a way of phrasing abortion to mean anything good. Now, as a com, as communities of people and as societies where it actually then becomes colonisation, a neo-colonisation is the people from the Western world come to Africa and try to give us these kinds of language that we could never translate into our native tongue. They tell us that it actually can mean something for a woman to do something with her body which isn't really morally bad. But, anyway, the first thing that we have to think of and remember is that as communities, which

was one thing that I highlighted right at the beginning, culturally most of the African communities actually believe by tradition, by their, their cultural standards that abortion is a direct attack on human life. So, for anybody to convince the woman that abortion is good ((applause)) sorry ((holds hand up to cease applause)). So, I'm sorry, so, for anybody to be able to convince any woman in Africa that abortion is a good thing and can be a good thing, you first have to tell her that what her parents and her grandparents and her ancestors taught her wa, is actually wrong. You gonna must tell her that they have always been wrong in their thinking. And that, madam, is colonisation ((applause)).

Mette Gjerskov starts the exchange by drawing from a liberal political stance. She refers to 'choice', freedom of choice and decision-making over reproductive issues. This is paired with those in authority (it is not clear exactly who she means, but probably all those involved in legislation and service delivery) doing no harm, not imposing and 'allowing' women to decide for themselves. In all of this, the agency of women to make decisions is unquestioned, as well as the possibility of those in authority neutrally providing the spaces within which choices and decisions can be made.

Obianuju Ekeocha's response draws from a de-colonisation approach, in which global colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial power relations are highlighted and undermined. She refers to Westerners imposing cultural and linguistic features on African life, features that are foreign to African ways of being. In order to argue that these are foreign to Africa, she speaks about tradition, culture, and moral messages passed from one generation to another. She claims superiority in terms of understanding the languages of Africa, which do not accommodate the notion of abortion.

Despite the two speakers coming from opposing camps, what they share is pre-facing their arguments with claims of authority. Obianuju Ekeocha has an easier time with this. She is from Nigeria and can place herself directly within the

‘tribal’ structure of the country and to refer to her “native” tongue. As such, she claims legitimacy in speaking about abortion in Africa. Mette Gjerskov must engage in much more labour to establish her credentials to say anything about the matter. She indicates that she has been to Africa a lot, including a list of the countries she has visited (thereby establishing to the audience that she understands that Africa should not be homogenized), and that she has spoken to a lot of ‘African women’ (thereby ironically homogenizing African women). Thus, although she is not from Africa, she claims legitimacy in talking about Africa from intimate knowledge thereof. These claims of legitimacy to talk on behalf of or about African women are imbedded in the politics of representation and voice which are discussed later.

Some basic facts concerning abortion in African countries

The legality of abortion in Africa can be divided into six categories, as outlined in Table 1. Eleven African countries prohibit abortion altogether. Others have restrictive legislation that allows abortion under conditions. However, as noted by the Guttmacher Institute, women are often not able to navigate the legal and health systems required to access abortions under these circumstances². Four countries permit abortion on request (within gestation periods), and one on a wide range of grounds. It is, thus, evident that the legal status of abortion differs considerably across the continent.

It is estimated that 15% of pregnancies in Africa end in abortion⁶. Interestingly, in a study of abortion trends world-wide, it was found that when countries were grouped according to the legal grounds for abortion, no evidence was found that abortion rates were associated with the legal status of abortion (in the period 2010 – 2014 the rate was 37 abortions per 1000 women (range of 34–51) where abortion is prohibited altogether or allowed only to save a woman’s life, and 34 (range of 29–46) where it is available on request)⁶. This finding indicates that women will find a way to terminate a pregnancy even when the legal and healthcare structures are not in place to do so.

What does differ, however, are the outcomes of a termination of pregnancy. Given the number of African countries with restrictive abortion legislation, it is unsurprising that there is a high rate of unsafe abortions. Unsafe abortions are defined as a procedure performed by people lacking the necessary skills or in an environment not meeting minimal medical standards, or both⁷. Using this definition, 97% of all abortions that take place in Africa could be classified as unsafe abortion⁸. It is estimated that at least 9% of maternal deaths in Africa are due to unsafe abortion, with 1.6 million African women being treated annually for complications from unsafe abortion⁹. Unsafe abortion is high in Africa partially because of a lack of clarity and knowledge about the abortion laws in many African countries, coupled with poor access to health services¹⁰.

It must be noted that liberal abortion legislation does not necessarily imply social acceptance and lack of stigma, as is demonstrated in South Africa where abortion is available upon request in the first trimester. Despite enabling legislation, service provision is often extremely limited, with a significant number of women not receiving the abortion care they requested¹¹. Delays in the delivery of services and long queues at facilities are common, and many health service providers and facility managers cite personal objections to abortion on the grounds of conscience¹². Nurses who do volunteer report stigmatisation, victimisation and intimidation in the communities where they live¹³.

Is abortion un-African?

Is abortion un-African, as claimed by Obianuju Ekeocha? In this section the paper engages with various arguments that could be put forth regarding this claim. The authors acknowledge that, in trying to engage with this question, they are potential of deploying the exact strategy that the paper critiques later on (viz. homogenizing Africa; conflating a geographical concept – Africa as a continent – with sociological issues). Given this, the paper tries to nuance the argument as much as possible.

Table 1: Legality of Abortion in African Countries 2016²

Reason	Countries
Prohibited altogether, or no explicit legal exception to save the life of a woman	Angola, Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville), Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mauritania, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal
To save the life of a woman	Côte d'Ivoire, Libya (e), Malawi, Mali (a, b), Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan (a), Tanzania, Uganda
To preserve physical health (and to save a woman's life)*	Benin (a, b, c), Burkina Faso (a, b, c), Burundi, Cameroon (a), Chad (c), Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea (e, f), Eritrea (a, b), Ethiopia (a, b, c, d), Guinea (a, b, c), Kenya, Lesotho (a, b, c), Morocco (f), Niger (c), Rwanda (a, b, d), Togo (a, b, c), Zimbabwe (a, b, c)
To preserve mental health (and all the above reasons)	Algeria, Botswana (a, b, c), The Gambia, Ghana (a, b, c, d), Liberia (a, b, c), Mauritius (a, b, c, e), Namibia (a, b, c), Seychelles (a, b, c, d), Sierra Leone, Swaziland (a, b, c)
Socioeconomic reasons (and all the above reasons)	Zambia (c)
Without restriction as to reason	Cape Verde, Mozambique, South Africa, Tunisia

*Includes countries with laws that refer simply to "health" or "therapeutic" indications, which may be interpreted more broadly than physical health. NOTES: Some countries also allow abortion in cases of (a) rape, (b) incest, (c) fetal impairment or (d) other grounds. Some restrict abortion by requiring (e) parental or (f) spousal authorization. Countries that allow abortion on socioeconomic grounds or without restriction as to reason have gestational age limits (generally the first trimester); abortions may be permissible after the specified gestational age, but only on prescribed grounds.

The argument that abortion is un-African is given credence by the fact that it is very often international organizations that advocate for abortion access in Africa, including Ipas and the Guttmacher Institute which were founded and are headquartered in the USA. These organizations frequently use public health and medical discourses in their advocacy, referring, to the rates of unsafe abortion, the health outcomes of unsafe abortion, and the need to post-abortion care¹⁴. Despite the ostensible neutrality of this kind of language, these attempts have largely been unsuccessful in overturning the claim that abortion is morally wrong, un-African and a (neo) colonial imposition.

The fact that a significant number of women undergo abortions, whether it is legal or not in their countries, could be cited as an argument opposing the idea that abortion is un-African. If a practice is relatively common, can it be said to be "against the culture" of the region? Those opposing abortion would argue that, indeed, this is the case because the practice of abortion is owing to the influence of colonialism and, more recently, subtler forms of imperialism.

Thus, the only other clear argument against abortion being un-African, is to ask whether abortion existed in pre-colonial Africa. This question is, as with many such questions, a thorny one to answer. Many of the accounts on

which pre-colonial histories are based were written by missionaries who, of course, viewed the world in which they were located through a lens and who were, for the most part, men. Nevertheless, there are enough accounts to show that abortion did indeed take place in pre-colonial Africa, at least in several countries.

A study by Devereux, using ethnographic and historical records in over 400 preindustrial societies, found evidence of abortion in pre-colonial Africa¹⁵. Among the Malagasy (from Madagascar) abortion was widely used to control the number of children; the Masai women of Kenya sought abortions when men who impregnated them were foreign, sick, or old. Similar evidence was found of abortions amongst the Masai (Kenya) and Owambo (Namibia) when pregnancy occurred among girls. In Nigeria and Cameroon, Efik women sought abortion if there were suspicions of a deformed fetus¹⁶.

The methods used included a pharmacopeia of abortifacient remedies, emetics and purgatives. Some of these were in common use among diverse ethnic groupings in South Africa where the Malays were said to favour red geraniums, while Khoi herbalists relied on a type of thorn bush, and Zulu women on a peppery shrub termed *uhlungughlungu*¹⁶. Women from ancient Egyptian times to the 15th century were said to have relied on an extensive pharmacopoeia

of herbal abortifacients and contraceptives to regulate fertility¹⁶.

Colonisation brought with it the introduction of laws that restricted abortions in most African countries. Most of these laws, which are highly restrictive, and are rooted in laws European governments developed in the 18th century and transplanted to colonial states, are still in existence¹⁴. The laws are based on Christian and Islamic religions (the spread of Christianity was, of course, part of the colonization process). A common feature of colonial abortion laws was criminalisation of abortion, whether the laws originated from Belgium, France, Italy, Spain or Portugal¹⁴.

“Culture” in discussions on abortion

At the center of Ekeocha’s views is the assertion that those calling for legalization of abortion are cultural imperialists. This kind of argument has been used in other controversial areas, with, for example, Western countries being accused of imposing sexual immorality (LGBTIQ issues are included here), population control and gender theory¹⁶. All these are immoral and thus un-African.

The Nigerian delegate in the exchange above just like other anti-abortion advocates in Africa portrayed herself as the protector of African culture⁹. Language, tradition, cultural mores, and moral lessons from parents and grandparents are fiercely defended. Traditions and language are static, and differences are completely ignored (Ekeocha, for example, generalizes her experience as somebody from the Igbo tribe to all African women). African ‘culture’ is viewed as a bounded entity that can be neatly described with little to no contestation taking place as to meanings or practices. In such an understanding those with different views are constructed as needing to be de-colonized.

The argument for de-colonisation has gained significant traction in post-colonial settings, long after the end of formal colonialism. Neo-colonialism and new forms of economic, ideological and cultural imperialism are highlighted and opposed. Ekeocha’s argument,

therefore, finds fertile ground in which to stake its claim.

However, post-colonial theorists have been critical of the static, homogenizing view of culture espoused by the Nigerian delegate. They argue that, while the notion of culture is important to consider in understanding (neo)colonial power relations, it is equally important to not stultify culture or to appeal to a myth of origin¹⁸. Instead, “culture” is viewed as a dynamic process of interaction between individuals and the social environment, with contestations taking place within a multiplicity of meanings, interpretations and practices¹⁸. Current “cultural” practices are deriving in complex and heterogeneous ways from historical contexts and in the intersection of culture with issues of (neo)colonial, gender, class and race power relations. Key issues in post-colonial thought are the politics of representation and politics of voice, which are discussed in the section following the next one.

How “Culture” is understood in abortion research?

The public “Abortion in un-African” advocates, like Ekeocha, are not alone in this sentiment. Research has shown how people in some rural areas of South Africa perceive abortion as “killing and inevitably destructive of cultural values and traditions”¹⁹. In Kenya men “were generally condemnatory toward abortion, viewing it as women’s strategy for concealing their deviation from culturally acceptable gender and motherhood standards”¹.

Culture and religion have been shown to intersect in public attitudes to abortion. In a study in Ethiopia, women viewed abortion as being morally and socially hazardous due to cultural and religious norms regarding abortion²⁰. This led the women in the study to be stigmatised and isolated for having an abortion. Similar results were found in Ghana, where abortion was seen by women who had terminated a pregnancy to be sinful in terms of religion and culturally shameful²¹. While ‘cultural’ norms are anti-abortion, certain pregnancies are also depicted as culturally problematic. Thus, in Kenya, researchers found that women only

considered having an abortion because it “shields ... against the shame of mistimed or socially unviable entry into recognized motherhood”¹. This means that although abortion is seen as culturally shameful, it is also used to hide a culturally-complicated pregnancy. The conditions that have been found to make a pregnancy culturally-complicated are linked to traditional beliefs surrounding sexual practices¹.

In situations where abortion is legal, the stigma implicit in cultural and religious understandings is important in influencing women’s reluctance to visit healthcare providers or clinics within their communities for fear of being recognised and ostracised, consequently impacting on their right to choose²². Where it is illegal, cultural and religious understandings influence how the abortion is carried out (usually in secret, far away from where they live) and women’s reluctance to seek healthcare thereafter²³. Thus, many complications surrounding abortion in Africa are intertwined with cultural and sometimes religious beliefs which put the focus on the un-African and immoral nature of abortion. Cultural norms and religious beliefs operate as regulatory discourses which provide scripts on how people should behave and act²⁴.

Politics of representation

The politics of representation focuses on the question of who speaks for whom and what is being said. Gjerskov claims to be able to speak from an *understanding* of African women but is painfully aware that she cannot speak *for* African women. Ekeocha, however, claims to be able to talk on behalf of African women, from a position of tribal origin, speaking an indigenous language and cultural understanding. How are these claims understood within a politics of representation and of voice, as understood from an African feminisms perspective?

The question of representation has been taken up by African feminists in their rejection of so-called Western feminist approaches that see African women as problems that require solutions⁵. The Nigerian delegate’s statements, given in response to the Danish delegate, echo the assertion that white European and American

women represent African women ways, placing themselves as authorities who know what African women require. In the following the paper shows, however, that in speaking for all African women Ekeocha is caught up in the same (neo)colonial stance of which she accuses Gjerskov.

The exercise of speaking for (as opposed to about) others in which the Nigerian delegate engages in is a political one and is tied to the production of knowledge and power. She positions herself as an insider and an authority on African women, thereby formulating what knowledge counts and what can be said and done in relation to abortion. This position constructs the narrative “abortion is un-African” as the only “truth” with all other positions (including the one held by the Danish delegate) as, on the contrary, untrue. The homogenization of Africa and African women adds weight to the “truth” claim made by Ekeocha.

Representation, of course, involves the dual process of speaking about and speaking for others. The type of representation done by Ekeocha is what Spivak calls *vertreten* (to represent or speak for politically)²⁴. Gjerskov speaks about others from an outsider perspective, but with the caveat of knowledge of insider accounts.

The question, then, becomes: Who Ekeocha is representing? In her statement, it is Africa and African women. However, as indicated above, legislation differs considerably across African countries. Many women undergo abortions across the continent (estimates from the Guttmacher Institute show that between 2010 and 2014 about 8.3 million induced abortions (many of these unsafe) occurred each year in Africa)². Research shows that women cite diverse reasons for deciding on an abortion. For example, in South Africa and Ghana, being unmarried and young are key factors^{21, 26}. Research in Zimbabwe and South Africa has also shown that women, while having to deal with social negativity surrounding abortion, mostly do not report regretting their decision²⁷. Women also carefully consider abortion options in making their decision²¹. Despite Ekeocha’s claims, she simply cannot be speaking for the millions of women across Africa who, for diverse reasons, feel unable to continue with their pregnancy.

Given this, what do Ekeocha's claims represent? The claims highlight the possibilities of women oppressing women through their relative privilege, through homogenization, and through a failure to recognize the 'other'. These are elaborated on below.

The Nigerian delegate's position in life in comparison to other African women is privileged: she is well-educated and lives in Britain; she can afford to travel and has a range of choices many African women do not have. In this case, Alcoff's warning that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" becomes relevant²⁸.

In homogenizing African women, the Nigerian delegate violates a key tenet of African feminisms which recognizes the multiplicity of, and differences due to, the "complex realities of African women's everyday experiences"²⁹. Ampofo, Beoku-Betts and Osirim highlight "that there are many cultures, multiple and complex identities that need to be studied and understood in Africa and its diaspora, such as the growing focus on representation, identities, subjectivities, and sexualities"³⁰. These pluralities can be seen in different views on abortion: one cannot, thus, in all certainty claim a position that represents all African women on abortion. Homogenizing African women is paramount to silencing of (some) African women's voices and fails to acknowledge and celebrate the diversities and multiplicities of women on the continent⁴.

The search for common issues amongst African women and the African continent can lead to an objectifying of the "other". Lionnet challenges feminists to learn how to find common ground "without objectifying the 'other' woman or subsuming collective goals under the banner of sameness"³¹. Spivak states that "however unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there is a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?"³². Engaging in such reflection allows for questions to be asked regarding voice and the way the "other" who us is not is

represented, thereby negating potential homogenization as evidenced in Ekeocha's statements.

Should abortion be seen purely as a matter of choice?

The paper turns now to the alternative suggestion by Mette Gjerskov that abortion should be viewed as a woman's choice along with such issues as the timing of childbirth and contraception. "Choice" and rights have, of course, been the mainstay of liberal Western feminist advocacy around the legalisation of, and access to, abortion. It is argued that a woman should be granted the right to make decisions about her own body and that the choice concerning the outcome of a pregnancy should be the woman's alone³³. In order to control their lives, it is indicated, women need to be able to control their reproductivity³⁴.

Although this approach has had significant effects in the West, it has not been without its criticisms, all of which are relevant in its application in Africa, including that it: assumes active unfettered agency on the part of women with little attention paid to the power relations within which 'choices' are made; fails to examine the social context that would be required for people to exercise their rights; wrests abortion from other reproductive issues, including the gendered conditions that lead to unwanted pregnancies and the existing social relations and sexual divisions around which responsibility for pregnancy and children are assigned; hides the stigma associated with abortion; and glosses over the several obstacles that women negotiate in accessing abortion³⁵. What these critiques have in common is that they locate women within context, something that Gjerskov fails to do despite her claim to have spoken to many African women.

In other words, abortion is foregrounded, while the complexity of women's sexual, reproductive and mothering lives recedes into the background. It is around this exact issue that African feminists have critiqued Western feminists: that abortion is placed at the top of their agenda³⁶. African feminists have argued that abortion challenges the status quo of

‘private/domestic vs ‘public/political’ spaces created by patriarchal power relations with the restriction of abortion in Africa being likened to domesticity and “the gender roles that the patriarchal capitalist state has constructed for women, that is, childcare and homecare”⁴. This critique, however, is layered within complexities of women’s social and reproductive lives⁴.

A grounded reproductive justice approach

If neither a culturally-based de-colonialist stance nor a liberal feminist approach to abortion represents an emancipatory approach to abortion in Africa, what is the alternative? In this section a grounded reproductive justice approach is briefly outlined. This approach is described more fully by Chiweshe²⁷.

Reproductive justice is a concept that links reproductive rights with social justice³⁷. It arose in the 1980s after organizations representing American women of colour and Native American women felt the need to “expand the rhetoric of reproductive rights that focused primarily on choice within the abortion debate and was seen to restrict the dialogue to those groups of women they felt could make such a choice in the first place”³⁸. In addition to advocating, as do traditional reproductive rights platforms, for the access of birth control for women, reproductive justice provides a framework that focuses additional attention on the social, political, and economic inequalities among different communities that contribute to the infringements of reproductive justice.

The notion of reproductive justice represented resistance to white middle-class Western feminist ideas of choice. “Choice”, it was argued, is the preserve of the privileged³⁷. Reproductive justice links reproductive rights to the “contextual nature of women’s lives”³⁹. In looking at abortion it shines a light on the “physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of women and girls”, and explicates how abortion is linked to women and girls economic, social, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and reproduction for themselves,

their families, and their communities in all areas of their lives⁴⁰.

Although a reproductive justice approach has great relevance for abortion in Africa, as it unpacks how social/cultural discourses and gendered power relations combine to make a pregnancy unwanted/unsupportable, it still needs, to be grounded in African philosophy for it to have impact in this context. The introduction of the African philosophical concept of *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu* would provide such grounding. Space does not allow a full explication of this argument, and readers are referred to Chiweshe²⁷ for deeper discussion. In summary, *Hunhu/Ubuntu* is an African philosophy which focuses on a shared humanity. Central to the concept of *Hunhu/Ubuntu* is the insistence that each individual’s existence is interconnected with that of the community and the overall environment in which he/she lives⁴¹. Compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity, and the building and maintenance of a community are emphasized. The woman who terminates a pregnancy can be seen, through the lens of *Ubuntuism*, as not just an individual making a choice to have an abortion but as a member of a community who has an unsupportable pregnancy: a pregnancy rendered complicated by interpersonal, religious, biological, cultural, economic, legal, and healthcare issues.

Keevy argues that “*ubuntu* embodies not only values and morals, but also justice”⁴². Justice, in this case, is perceived as “*ubuntu* fairness; doing what is right and moral in the indigenous African society”⁴³. As such *Hunhu/Ubuntu* is a negation of any form of oppression⁴⁴. By focusing on fairness and justice, the conditions under which women terminate pregnancies are foregrounded.

Conclusion

This paper problematized the recent statements spoken at a UN event by Obianuju Ekeocha, founder of Culture of Life Africa, a pro-life organization based in England who argued that abortion is un-African and that the calling for safe abortion from European countries amounts to neo-colonisation. This discourse of abortion being un-African has played an important role in keeping

abortion laws (many which were adopted during colonisation) restrictive. By saying abortion is un-African and is a creation of the Western world portrays a picture of an Africa that did not have abortion in one form or another pre-colonisation. Anthropological accounts have shown this to be untrue as evidence exists in such pre-colonial societies as Egypt, Malagasy, Masai, Owambo and, Chagga. The un-African discourse raises lots of complicated questions that include: Who is African? Who speaks on whose behalf? Who may speak? What claims may be made in relation to African women?

Discussions about the politics of representation have illuminated the inherent pitfalls in speaking for others. The dangers, as seen in Ekeocha's statements, lies in homogenizing the plurality of women under the banner of African women. This ignores the multiplicity of African women who hold a diversity of views and partake in different practices. African feminism sets an agenda in which the diversity amongst women is acknowledged, and the politics of voice, which highlights the risk of silencing the other by speaking for them, is explored.

The liberal approach to abortion, premised on "choice" and reproductive rights (as exemplified by Meete Gjerskov's input) is equally problematic. The power relations within which "choices" are made, the gendered conditions that lead to unsupported pregnancies, and the obstacles facing women in accessing healthcare are under-examined. The paper advocated a reproductive justice approach to abortion in Africa. This approach needs to be extended by being embedded in African philosophy, the concept of *Hunhu/Ubuntu*.

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Contribution of Authors

Both the authors conceived and designed the study and prepared the manuscript for publication. All the authors mentioned in the article have approved the manuscript.

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