

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

From Yewwu Yewwi to #FreeSenegal: Class, Gender and Generational Dynamics of Radical Feminist Activism in Senegal

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Feminists protesting gender-based violence and state violence have been instrumental to contesting the status quo and the shifting discourses, modes of organizing, and registers of protest in Senegal. Some 40 years after the emergence of Yewwu Yewwi, a major feminist movement, Senegalese feminists have returned to radical feminist organizing, despite increasing anti-gender backlash. In this essay, I draw on interviews with feminist activists and politicians between 2013 and 2022 to analyze the March 2021 protests in Senegal in light of previous protests. I argue that the intertwined dynamics of class, gender, and generation are critical to understanding the protests. I do this following the example of some feminist academics who have used intersectionality as a method, theory, and research agenda (Collins and Bilge 2016; Mohammed 2022). Innovations in protest strategies have allowed activists to overcome generational and ideological divides between feminist and women's rights organizations, as well as within feminist movements, and to resist strategic alliances between patriarchal and political powers.

A Historical Divide Between Women's Rights Protests and Feminist Protests

In Senegal, women's protest movements were instrumental to national liberation and have shaped postcolonial Senegalese politics. After independence, women's associations tended to focus on the political, social, and economic empowerment of women as full citizens with men as partners—a continuity of the consensus around liberation during decolonization struggles and state building (Dieng and Sall, 2023; Sarr 2016; see also Shireen Hassim's essay in this

Critical Perspectives symposium). Feminist movements, on the other hand, focused not just on women, but also on marginalized groups, and critiqued patriarchy. Their politics were more intersectional and can be traced to the leftist May 1968 student, worker, and peasant protests.

In 1984, Yewwu Yewwi for the Liberation of Women,¹ the first openly radical feminist movement, was created. Marie Angelique Savané, one of its founders, remembered how being radical activists differentiated them from other women's movements:

The creation of Yewwu Yewwi was in response to previous women's associations because we could not make them understand concepts such as patriarchy or the subordination of women to capitalism, even within leftist parties. I remain convinced that it is necessary to target what is most fundamental in a society, in its roots, to transform it. (interview, May 2019)

Created by left-wing activists, Yewwu Yewwi sought to integrate the masses and bridge the class, gender, generational, and rural-urban divides. Yewwu Yewwi pursued a range of strategies, from awareness raising to lobbying to civil disobedience (Kane and Kane 2018). It held open debates on reform of the Family Code and abortion rights, a bold move for the time. The movement created an award to recognize political efforts toward the emancipation of women,² denounced gender-based violence, created a magazine called *Fippu*³ as an advocacy tool, and formed international alliances with other feminist groups. Yewwu Yewwi did not depend on international funding and therefore was able to autonomously set and implement its agenda, unlike other women's organizations. The radical and intersectional feminist politics of Yewwu Yewwi were transgressive (Diop 2012). The emergence of Yewwu Yewwi, in addition to traditional women's organizing in the 1970s and 1980s, helped prepare the next generation of activists, whose struggles reveal the politics of difference as well as generational divergences (see, e.g., Gueye and Ba 2012).

Mobilizing without troubling the status quo, in contrast, has been the strategy for most traditional women's organizations in Senegal. This is illustrated by the case of mothers of deceased migrants organizing against clandestine emigration from Thiaroye-Sur-Mer on the outskirts of Dakar. Their "mobilizing without protesting" sought to prevent further tragedies by discouraging young Thiaroye inhabitants from boat migration and aiding the families of the missing (Bouilly 2016). Mobilizing without claiming gender parity is also a strategy utilized by Senegalese women social entrepreneurs, who are more interested in attaining economic autonomy and the social recognition of their productive role in society and the recognition of their rights in public spaces (Gning 2022).

The divide between women's movements and feminist protests still prevails. It is compounded by generational and ideological divides within feminist movements themselves, as illustrated by a dialogue that I had in September 2022 with the president of the Senegalese Women's Rights network, Siggil Jigeen, founded in 1998:

Our feminism is positivist: it is based on Senegalese values, not individualist Western values. It defends the most fundamental and basic needs of women

(education, food, economic autonomy, and reproductive rights), not LGBTQIA+ rights or sexual liberation.

In Senegal, social and gender norms dictating what it means to be a “good woman” explain why some women’s rights activists hesitate to embrace the feminist label and take a stance on LGBTQIA+ rights. As Codou Bop (2010) writes, “Most Senegalese women are unable or unwilling to adopt a style of agency characterised by overt collective resistance, radicalism, or rupture. At the individual level, instead, women bargain and negotiate strategically.”

This dichotomy in strategy and radicalism between feminist and women’s movements existed in the early years of these movements. Yet scholars have also argued that while Senegalese feminists disrupt the status quo and advance ideas of freedom, traditional women’s organizations and associations translate feminist ideas into material ones by aligning with the policy makers in charge of enforcing them in formal institutions (Guèye et al. 2015; Sow 2012).⁴ Bop (2016) notes that feminists seek to change power relations, while the women’s organizations that do not use the label “feminist” pursue women’s empowerment: “These women who go to the Supreme Court, who rallied, who petitioned, who advocated, I am sure they won’t consider themselves as feminists but what they have been doing is really changing a lot in Senegal.”

The Gender, Class, and Generational Dimensions of Protests

Historical and contemporary state violence against feminist and youth activists, as well as political figures, has not silenced protesters. Backlash and authoritarianism created a fertile ground for radical shifts in feminist and popular struggles, leading to protests focused on sexual and gender-based violence and the March 2021 popular uprising in Senegal.

“Sister Comrades” Facing State Violence in the 1970s and 1980s

One illustration of the violent treatment of Senegalese feminists and youth activists is the case of journalist Eugénie Rokhaya Aw. Aw was involved in radical left movements when she was arrested, first under President Léopold Senghor, for keeping copies of the clandestine revolutionary magazine *Xare-bi*.⁵ She miscarried while in detention. Aw reported that President Senghor’s first comment, when informed of her loss, was “I hope she [Eugénie] is not dead” (Yannek Simalla 2019). This happened after the tragic death in prison on May 11, 1973, of radical left student activist Ousmane Blondin Diop, aged 26.

Another central political and feminist figure involved with Yewwu Yewwi reported that her radical feminist activism was met by police brutality. As she recalled in an interview with me in May 2019, “From 1968 [under President Senghor] to the [Abdou] Diouf [president of Senegal from 1981 to 2000] era, I suffered. I was arrested several times. In the 1980s, I was even beaten by the police once in front of my son after a demonstration against apartheid in Dakar. My husband was also arrested many times.” This repeated targeting of activists led them to prepare to be tortured and to organize their resistance.

Women's and Poor Youth Bodies as Political Battlefields in the 2020s

On February 3, 2021, Ousmane Sonko, 47, an anti-corruption and anti-imperialist opposition leader, was accused of rape by a young masseuse, Adjé Sarr, and arrested on his way to court in March 2021. The arrest took place amid growing anger toward President Macky Sall for his failed political promises and the increased cost of living. In a TV interview, Sonko issued a call to arms to his supporters to contest his arrest. For five days in March, protesters, young Senegalese citizens especially, accompanied Sonko to court, took to the streets, and mobilized online to support Sonko with the hashtag #FreeSenegal.

Gender and class inequality intersected with generational dynamics during these protests, but also in the feminist response to the events. Immediately after Sarr made her accusation, some young feminist groups issued statements in support of her and against the victim blaming that she faced on social media (Diop 2021). In contrast, a group of more established feminist organizations such as Siggil Jigeen issued a statement claiming that their 18 member organizations did not sign that statement.⁶ Sarr, who contested her silencing and reiterated her accusations in a TV interview on March 18, 2021 (Leral TV 2021), was accused by Sonko supporters of fabricating her rape and being instrumentalized by the political majority. This moment was painful for victims of rape who felt that they stood no chance of being believed or having a fair trial. In support of Sarr, young feminist associations in Senegal and feminists in the diaspora mobilized transnationally using social media to share messages of support arguing for the need to move from #FreeSenegal to #FreeAdjéSarr (Ahidjo-Iya 2021; Dieng 2021b, 2021c). This led both Sarr,⁷ and the feminists who defended her, to face further online abuse.

Gender, class, and generational asymmetries were also revealed as the protest led to 14 fatalities (Amnesty International 2022),⁸ 600 wounded, and the destruction of property that represented French capitalist interests. And although all those killed during the protests were young men, they were mostly from underprivileged backgrounds. Similarly, Adjé Sarr is from a poor family; she has migrated to Dakar from rural Senegal. For these young men and Sarr, justice is deferred because of the inaccessibility of robust investigations. Where the political elite are concerned, the bodies of young people, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, serve as arenas for the political elite to protect their power. Despite these feminist protests and the yet-to-be concluded investigations, Sonko was elected mayor of the city of Ziguinchor in January 2022, highlighting alliances between patriarchal and political power at the intersections of gender, generational, and class contempt in contemporary Senegal.⁹

Senegalese feminists are advocating for a public trial with live broadcast. (Seck 2023). On 17 January 2023, the investigating judge decided that Ousmane Sonko will face trial on charges of rape and making death threats to Adjé Sarr.

Beyond Hashtag Activism: Youth and Feminist Organizing in Senegal and Transnationally

Feminist protests in Senegal demonstrate how gender inequality intersects with class inequality and generation and illustrate how women's and youth bodies are

political battlefields for patriarchal power and state violence. Instances of state and gender-based violence, including sexual violence, marked a tipping point that significantly impacted how Senegalese youth, especially feminists, rallied behind the hashtags #FreeSenegal and #FreeAdjiSarr. This is further evidenced by the June 2021 #JusticePourLouise protests, in which local and diasporic feminists organized transnationally to push for the arrest and eventual incarceration of rapist Souleymane Sidy Seck (Sambe 2021).

While online activism has grown in Senegal in recent years, the young feminists I interviewed emphasizes that online and offline forms of activism are not mutually exclusive (interviews, 2022). Digital and new technologies facilitate organizing as activists can access a wider network and lead large-scale protests at low cost (Dieng 2019, 2021a), which is an advantage for small feminist networks in a context of reduced funding and shrinking of civic spaces. Yet the advantage of offline organizing is that it offers a respite from online abuse faced by feminists, making a combination of in-person meetings and virtual communities vital for creating new avenues for social transformation.

Notes

1. Wolof for “to become conscious in order to free oneself.”
2. Thomas Sankara, the president of Burkina Faso, was the first recipient of the prize.
3. *Fippu* means “to revolt” in Wolof.
4. Amina Mama (1995) makes a similar distinction between feminists and “femocrats,” assimilating the latter to a feminine autocracy whose privileges come from their association with patriarchy and the state.
5. “The Fight” in Wolof.
6. Réseau Siggil Jigeen (@rsiggiljigeen), “#RSJ Communiqué suite à la publication d’un communiqué d’un supposé Collectif pour la Promotion et la Protection des droits des femmes sur l’affaire de viol concernant un politicien sénégalais #SiggilJigeen n’est ni de près ni de loin concerné par ce communiqué #kebetu #Senegal,” Twitter, February 9, 2021, <https://twitter.com/rsiggiljigeen/status/1359245391670243333>.
7. This did not silence Sarr, who gave a further media interview to RFI in March 2022: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220302-s%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal-adj-i-sarr-sort-du-silence-un-an-apr%C3%A8s-ses-accusations-contre-ousmane-sonko> (accessed January 10, 2023).
8. The victims were Cheikh Coly, Baye Cheikh Diop, Famara Goudiaby, Cheikhouna Ndiaye, Pape Sidy Mbaye, Mansour Thiam, Alassane Barry, Sadio Camara, Moussa Drame, Modou Ndiaye, Massire Gueye Cheikh Wade, Bounama S. Sagna, and Cheikh Abdoulaye Mane.
9. Furthermore, in December 2022, Senegalese member of Parliament (MP) Amy Ndiaye Gniby was assaulted at the Parliament by fellow MPs Massata Samb and Mamadou Niang during a budget session. A few days later, a Facebook group in which men bonded over misogyny was also denounced (see Gueye and Sylla 2022).

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