

Decentring the colonial gaze: A conversation on inclusive knowledge and evidence for Violence against Women Prevention in Africa

Written by: Edna Ninsiima and Dinnah Nabwire

The colonialists taught us that everything outside the formal classroom setting is not valid. Now they take our stories, repackage and sell them back to us while insisting that we need ten years of experience and a PhD to qualify.

- Lucky Kobugabe, panelist.

In organising against what has been accurately tagged as "a shadow pandemic", actors require, among other things, knowledge production and presentation of evidence on our multiple identities and in expansive contexts. Yet within spaces working to curb this global fight, professional hierarchies and systemic undermining of Southern knowledge and evidence that predate most of our existence continue to prevail. These have reproduced legacies of disavouring and even exploiting African women's experiences, intellectual efforts, and community works in their groups as organisations, individual activists, researchers, and practitioners.

On September 09, 2021, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), Raising Voices and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) unveiled an [Introductory guide](#) (also [available in French](#)) for the creation of prevention knowledge and evidence for African women's rights organisations in a [webinar](#) themed *Decolonised and Inclusive: Reflections on the generation of VAW prevention evidence for African Women's Rights Organisations*.

The Guide is an extension of the [Violence Against Women \(VAW\) Prevention Primer](#) (also [available in French](#)) produced by Rasing Voices and AWDF in 2019, providing an in-depth look into approaches to generating knowledge and evidence on the prevention of violence against women. It seeks to deconstruct the traditional framing on ownership of knowledge and evidence and prioritises methodologies and processes that centre the voices, needs and expertise of African women and women's rights organisations.

Jane Benett, one of the lead authors of the VAW Prevention knowledge and evidence Guide, highlighted the collaborative approach undertaken and voiced the need for cross-contextual thinking to acknowledge the complex and nuanced diversity within African contexts for inclusive knowledges.

*The **Generating knowledge and evidence on the prevention of violence against women: An introductory guide for African women's organisations** explores violence against women through an African feminist perspective and challenges conventional approaches to knowledge and evidence creation and use. It provides tools for how to embark on the journey of creating and utilising knowledge and evidence through extensive feminist approaches that tap into our indigenous meanings, resources and expertise.*

In addition to other practical steps, the Guide offers alternatives like exploring art/ists and community-engagement forms of knowledge production like storytelling, instead of mandatory "academically accredited" knowledge forms or the clustering of all knowledge and evidence creators as only researchers. The principles therein encourage a shared knowledge creation experience within an organisation, unlike the conventional top-down program building and learning.

Panel discussion on advancing inclusive VAW Prevention knowledge and evidence

Three multidisciplinary speakers, namely; Chi-Chi from the Population Council, Lucky Kobugabe from the Gender-Based Violence Network and Pontso Mafethe from the African Women's Development Fund, formed the panel and articulated critical reflections on the status of challenges of African women's rights organisations, experiences and contribution towards building inclusive knowledge and evidence for violence against women prevention. The panel was moderated by AWDF's Knowledge Management Specialist and one of the Knowledge and Evidence Guide editors, Dinnah Nabwire.

One critical emphasis from the panel presentation was the need for researchers moving either from Global North to South or urban to rural areas to approach studies without preconceived thoughts. African women have long been socialised to disqualify our knowledge, and it is time to change those self-deprecating narratives.

As African women, we absolutely must have confidence in what we know and not feel obligated to define everything in ways that do not speak to what we want to say about our own lives.

- Pontso Mafethe, panellist.

Collaborate to decolonise. In undoing dominant cycles of knowledge creation that prioritise perspectives of the Global North, we must think about what qualifies as "expertise" and who gets to determine those qualifications. Decolonising and shifting the centre takes much work, so there needs to be a willingness from people in both the "colonisers" and "colonised" groupings to invest their resources, capacities and cultivate a conscious effort to actively reimagine what inclusive knowledge looks like.

Disproportionate funding also deters progress in inclusive VAW prevention. Panellists noted that significant funding still went to Northern epistemologies compared to those in the global South, which reinforces a cycle of 'extracting' knowledge rather than building a collaborative approach that values what cross-context actors bring to the table. Therefore, a significant step in decentering the colonial gaze is advocating for funding African women's rights organisations and groups doing the work.

Participants' reflections and emerging issues

Participants asked about the risk of homogenising women and African women, which leads to excluding some groups that are part of our diversity. In this case, 'African woman' is about how or whether their existence interacts and navigates systems of oppression as a result of them living on the continent.

The panellists made a call for intersectionality as a starting point to cultivating inclusive knowledge and evidence. Gender non-conforming people were highlighted as one of the groups that remained systematically excluded from violence against women prevention knowledge and evidence on the continent.

Gender is complex and patriarchal violence harms women and gender non-conforming people (outside of the cis-hetero facet)

- Chi-Chi Undie, panelist.

Panellists reflected on the series of the Non-consensual Distribution of Intimate Images by [African Feminism](#) published June 2020, which reported an increased target of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer (LBQ) persons. The journey ahead requires us to actively create knowledge and seek evidence of violence meted out to the minoritised group as often as possible.