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**Social change and the role of feminist movements, CSOs and networks in raising awareness
on women in public and political life**

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Introduction

The Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has decided on "women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls" as the main discussion topic for its 2021 session. Accordingly, it is crucial to examine "social change and the role of feminist movements, CSOs and networks in raising awareness on women in public and political life" to measure women's level of engagement in these areas. Indeed, who has been in a better position than social, women's and feminist movements – whether they are socioeconomic and professional, cultural, religious, members of civil society, non-governmental organizations, networks, political parties, trade unions – to put the women's agenda on the front page, regardless of the differing situations in Africa, Asia or the rest of the world? Women's involvement in various struggles has certainly stood the test of time, but its topicality is so ingrained in contemporary history that it caused Michelle Bachelet, then Executive Director of UN Women, to say that "the 21st century will be the century of girls and women" (2011). Political participation among African women will be the focus of this presentation. This will be assessed over the last 50 years, which have seen the increasingly significant presence of discourse of and about women heard, criticized, accepted or rejected by public opinion and various political, cultural and religious authorities whose decisions carry weight.

Several decades of debates and actions of all kinds have testified to the mobilization of women around the issues that have troubled their societies. Admittedly, it is countries in the North that have generally determined the major global problems affecting contemporary global societies or more specifically women, including how they are analysed and tackled, and the strategies adopted to address them. However, faced with the divergences arising from different contexts and perspectives, the global women's movement has fragmented into a multitude of groups that attest to its diversity and richness, in both the North and the South. Today, African women are focusing their mobilization efforts on their own environment and devising appropriate strategies to address their concerns. They have built on their experiences at meetings, drawing comparisons with other movements during international conferences, particularly those of the United Nations on women (1975–1995). And if, at the time of independence, it was difficult for them to make their case to the single-party authorities busy building a strong state, it is now easier for them to take a stand in the face of politics and global society.

Many changes have therefore occurred that need to be analysed in order to understand the elements of culture, economics and politics that have advanced women's status and rights, as well as the barriers that persist against their participation in public and political life.

Replacement of the conceptual frameworks used to assess women's participation in public and political life

This is undoubtedly one of the most critical steps in advancing the thinking and action of women's movements, especially feminists. They have effectively discussed, re-interpreted and replaced these frameworks as ideas have progressed, challenges have been prioritized and the world order has undergone profound changes. "Feminism" has been and remains an important axis of reflection that has given form and content to the discourses and methodologies of struggle, regardless of its critics.

Women's and feminist organizations, from both the research arena and the community sector, have questioned the various ways of engaging with the continent's problems, how to take action and the scope of those actions. The development of feminism as a tool for analysis, encountered in several fields (such as international cooperation projects, major conferences and academic research) has raised many questions about legitimacy/adaptability, appropriation/reappropriation and even the so-called feminist identity, despite considerable scientific and political breakthroughs in several areas. Certainly, research has been carried out by African women on all the issues that have affected them. Studies on the recognition of women's status and roles have gradually incorporated internationally argued claims for women's rights. Women's and/or feminist organizations have claimed and reclaimed their perspectives and differences, in order to interpret and understand their sociocultural, economic and political contexts, to identify and breakdown the conditions of women's subordination and gender inequality. However, the authors and actors of these debates have faced continual questions: is it possible to be a feminist and remain essentially African, or how can African women be feminists? How is it possible to avoid being marginalized in the current cultural and political context? How can feminist discourses and praxis be used to meet the challenges of contemporary Africa, which is shaken by crises of all kinds? How can we share experiences and participate in the global debate popularized by women's world conferences in the past and technology-intensive social media today?

African women's difficulties on this point were not only related to gender power relations, which would be almost an easy battle to fight. It has been observed that they "are [still] challenged on what is considered as a Western approach in their [analyses] and aspirations. Whenever they oppose cultural injustices, their legitimacy is assessed by the degree of their Africanness. They are challenged on their religious identities, which are (almost) never to be questioned" (Sow, 2016). Their needs for greater equality, social justice and effective citizenship are confronted with ideologically and politically competing representations: so-called universal Western ideals, even though they are legacies of first colonization and then globalization; African civilizational values (re)valued as a sign of disruption, despite their many metamorphoses; religious values (re)summoned as cultural resources and alibis of identity.

From their pre-colonial history, African women have, on the whole, learned that women's political influence has not only existed, but has been decisive in the management of societies. This influence has generally been overshadowed in researchers' Western and then African historical research, many of whose more recent scientific and literary writings have denounced the male perspective. Matriarchy, established as a system of kinship and a principle of social organization in Black Africa, is the source of this feminine power, as taught by the works of Sheikh Anta Diop, which marked a crucial epistemological breakthrough in their time. It is through women that property, political power and many other symbolic positions and benefits have been (and in some cases continue to be) passed on. A reconsideration of matriarchy, as a way of understanding the place of women in African societies and the residual signs of this role, underlies several pieces of African research, conducted by authors such as Ifi Amadiume (1987; 1997), Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí (1997), N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba (1996; 2000) and Fatou Kiné Camara (2000). Men, regardless of their level of education, have regularly seized upon these to show how African cultures respected women (usually mothers) and, in practice, to challenge feminist claims against male dominance. Ahmeth Diouf, a lawyer and linguist, highlights the "people of maternal right" as a matriarchal family under the authority of women (2016). Jìmí Adésínà even gives his academic colleagues this scientific advice:

> "For African gender activists and scholars, the work of Amadiume and Oyéwùmí underscores the basis for appropriating the "useful past" of a diversity of African pre-colonial histories. As Amadiume said (1997:23): As European feminists […] seek possible ways out of their

historically oppressive patriarchal family structure […] inventing single-parenthood and alternative affective relationships [...] in the African case we do not need to invent anything. We already have a history and legacy of a women's culture – a matriarchy based on affective relationships – and this should be given a central place in analysis and social enquiry[1]" (2010:16).

It is true that Western, and later African, research has paid little attention to the place of women in African history, from prominent female figures to more ordinary women whose social reproduction and material and economic production activities have sustained societies. In ethno-anthropology, we have to wait until the 1960s to see the publication *Femmes d'Afrique noire*, edited by Denise Paulme, to shed light on women's political, economic or religious activities. Today, the search for historical African female figures who played major political roles in the pre-colonial period and then in the colonial struggle has led to a major breakthrough in history and literature.

As far as I am concerned, the political influence of women and their mobilization efforts at the time should be measured against the diversity of their situations, which were conditioned by the plurality and intermingling of ethnic groups, the complexity of both hierarchical and egalitarian sociopolitical formations, the criteria for hierarchical ranking, including seniority and caste, the interpenetration of local, Islamic and Christian religious systems and the gradual integration into local and regional, trans-Saharan and Atlantic economic and commercial systems. In Senegal, for example, their mediation in the election of sovereigns *(Damel* of *Kayoor)* or the transmission, through the maternal line, of political power and wealth to the management of power itself, have been important elements in the political game. The reputations of *Lingeer* Yacine Boubou of Kayoor, Lat Dïor Ngoné Latyr Diop of Baol, Njembët Mbodj and Ndaté Yalla Mbodj of Waalo, to name but a few, are now firmly established. A female elite emerged and participated in decision-making at the highest level. But it is clear that it has provided this leadership in conjunction with its class position. It is also possible that the unequal relations between the sexes and between social categories specific to hierarchical social and religious formations have had an impact on the positions of men and women and their relationships. They have determined women's power on issues as important as the division of labour and social reproduction, access to natural and economic resources, the establishment of cultural norms and values that govern social behaviour, and their share in collective decision-making, family and group responsibility. Thus, while an ideology of balancing roles between individuals has traditionally involved both men and women in the Joola area (Casamance) in the exercise of economic, religious and political responsibilities, the same has not been true of the Mandeng and Hal Pulaar societies (in northern and central Senegal), which are quite hierarchical and have instituted greater social and political subordination of women. Other examples exist in African history.

The return to history has led African feminists to question the processes of exclusion of women by the colonial powers from a system where they were not expected to be. The criteria for participation in this brand-new public and political life, in fact, excluded the vast majority of men, because of limited access to education, specific conditions for access to citizenship and subjects being denied any voting rights, among other reasons. In Senegal, the right to vote was granted, between 1872 and 1887, to "subjects" born in four communes (Dakar, Saint-Louis, Rufisque and Gorée), because they were considered citizens. However, women from the same municipalities were only granted the right to vote in 1946, at the end of the Second World War. The situation of these four municipalities, even though they discriminate against women, has not been found in any other imperial, British, Portuguese or German context. What has been common, however, is the under-representation of women in all public and political bodies, as strong markers of their invisible status, which is undoubtedly linked to the patriarchal vision of women's status in the colonizing countries.

This is probably not the place to discuss the impact of colonization on the status of women in the colonies. Extensive work has been devoted to it by the subjects of colonization themselves, through their academic research and activism. The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), which works across the continent, was among the first to devote its foundation to the "decolonization of social science research", to challenge feminism as a predominantly Western thought. This was in 1977. That year marked an important stage in the debate questioning colonization and decolonization, now referred to as the "decolonialism" debate, with new complexities linked to globalization.

Globalization has, indeed, contributed to the fragility of African populations, including women. Neo-liberal policies have led states to reduce public services and lower wages, privatizing their most productive sectors: agricultural resources, mining resources, and public social services to meet the basic needs of communities, including health, water and electricity (George, 2001). Globalization has led to the "marketisation of governance" and increased the impoverishment of the poor and middle classes (Taylor, 2002). Political powers have had to obey the dictates of the global economy and international financial institutions or risk being thrown into crisis and ejected from their seats (Traoré, 1999). They have managed modest poverty reduction programmes instead of development policies. Under such conditions, states have struggled to create "an enabling political environment to promote human rights as well as the participation of women and the institutionalisation of gender in ways that would result in equity and social justice" (Taylor, 2002:11). They have abandoned the protection of social rights and civil liberties, which is the basis of their mandate. DAWN, an organization that promotes the views of feminists in the south, has pointed out the policy contradictions, social fractures and exclusions of large sections of the population due to the restructuring of the global market. She points out that "the narrative of the marginalisation and exclusion of women is played out in unabated violence, increased militarisation of states, more fragmentation than ever before, persistent poverty and growing inequalities" (Taylor, 2002:14).

Decolonization is an important element of feminist struggles, as Sylvia Tamale discusses in *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (2019). According to Tamale, decolonizing knowledge requires rethinking sex, gender, gender relations and the universality of feminism. Can African women not question what feminism has defined as the oppression of women, patriarchy, or demand for equality? What is the meaning of "motherhood"? How can legal systems and family law be developed and how can we revisit concepts of human rights that meet the needs of African populations? Sylvia Tamale proposes Afro-feminism as a decolonial project that restores race and coloniality to their central place in African discourse. Only the return to its cultural, ontological and political roots can help theorize gender in a way that is understood and assumed across the continent. And finally, in this era of enforced globalization, just as pan-Africanism nourishes African unity with its promises, African feminism will either be pan-African or it will not survive.

All these debates – which have been described above and sustained by crises of all kinds, local, national and global – in addition to the globalization of issues in an interconnected world, the novelty of the themes of reflection and struggle, and the confrontation of ideas and perspectives, represent the profound changes that have taken place in Africa and in the world. The periods of democratization in the 1990s, promoted by national conferences and public forums on crucial issues, the liberalization of parties and the beginning of non-military alternation of power have favoured a change in attitudes. Women's movements, as well as other civil society organizations, have won the right to speak publicly. But what does the right to speak mean in the current political context in Africa?

Where are women in politics?

Where are they? The question remains relevant. Several of them have held prestigious positions, as presidents (Ethiopia, Central Africa, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Malawi and Mauritius), vice-presidents (Gambia), prime ministers (Gabon, Senegal, Togo), ministers, presidents of parliaments (the African Union parliament), parliamentarians, heads of major administrative, economic, technical and other pan-African and international organizations (the International Criminal Court), to name but a few. Their progress at this level seems, in the light of history, to have been faster than that *of* countries operating under the rules of Western democracy (Equal Measures 2030). Yet male presence is still very strong in the balance of power throughout the continent. The *Réseau des organisations féminines d'Afrique francophone* [Network of Women's Organizations in French-speaking Africa – ROFAF], which specializes in the relationship between gender and politics, concludes: "despite the awareness-raising and advocacy work carried out at all levels and in all countries in recent years, women remain in the minority in politics. And ministerial meetings and meetings of heads of state or government remain essentially men's meetings" (ROFAF, 2014).

The rate of women's assumption of political power and participation in governing bodies is significant to their social standing and can testify to the gains made as a result of struggles for equality in law. Their political promotion can be measured by the number of seats they occupy in national parliaments, governments and community bodies, namely regional, municipal and rural councils. It is also measured by their participation in associations and organizations such as political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organizations, whose figures are difficult to give here for comparative purposes. But how can we judge their participation and effectiveness?

While social changes have occurred throughout history, it is important to analyse the progress made and the obstacles to the promotion of women's rights, including political participation. The paradigms, i.e. the terms of the debate, have changed, as seen above, as ideas progress.

In addition to their consistent participation in development, which increased when they became heads of households (without acquiring the title of head of household) as a result of unemployment (linked, admittedly, to medicine, but also to underdevelopment, to the application of structural adjustment programmes, and then to the disruption of the world economy) and the migration of men, women have mobilized for greater participation in public and political life. Through their various actions and campaigns, they have urged States, with the support of international cooperation, to promote programmes to educate girls, keep them in school and ensure they have access to unprecedented levels of secondary and university education, particularly in the traditionally male sectors of science, engineering or medicine. This is a key asset for entry into government and private-sector jobs, right up to the top of the hierarchy. Revaluing women's contribution to the local, national and global economy has been another major ambition. Programmes have been established. The increase in income-generating activities with small loans granted to women's associations (economic interest groups), followed by the financing of more solid projects, have supported the emergence of women's entrepreneurship, traces of which could be seen in the field. It has been established that women occupy the majority of jobs in the so-called "informal" sector, because its rules reflect the formal (western) market economy. They work as street food vendors, processors of fruits, vegetables and fish products, dyers, potters and market traders, and sell all kinds of local and imported products. If they are mentioned here, it is because their activities feed families and countries. They foreshadowed the women entrepreneurs whose importance is finally being recognized as they travel around Africa and the world in search of new contracts for economies. Many of them played important roles in supporting politicians, both before and after independence; they had power, but without official recognition. Women market vendors in Guinea were the first to destabilize President Sékou Touré's regime in the early 1980s

because they considered state-imposed rules restrictive to the economy. Their anti-government protest march through the streets of the capital drew crowds and represented a setback to the President's authoritarian power. To give another example, Arame Diène, a Senegalese market woman, known as the "mother" of the Socialist Party under Presidents Léopold Senghor and Abdou Diouf, became the first illiterate woman (as she neither spoke nor wrote French, the official language) to sit in the National Assembly from 1983–2005. Thanks to her presence, Wolof was introduced into the Assembly's debates through simultaneous interpretation, paving the way for other national languages. This also provided a way for Diène to participate in political life at a leadership level.

Women have also advanced in a variety of other professional fields: handicrafts, commerce, natural resource management, higher education, the press, health and various technological sectors. The younger generations of women are leading, and certainly winning, the digital battle.

The gains achieved during the major conferences have also led States to sign most international conventions and establish gender management structures and advancement plans for women. With varying degrees of success, the majority of states have committed to reforming family codes and strengthening penal codes, with more provisions for the protection of women, such as raising the age of marriage, recognizing and strengthening the criminalization of violence against women (forced marriage, rape), abolishing female genital mutilation and other traditional practices that affect the health of mothers and children.

Despite substantial gains in this area, pressure groups have challenged these rights, seeking to maintain traditions that supposedly fulfil religious and cultural injunctions, in the name of Africanness or authenticity. While furthering their agenda, women have faced hostility from various institutions of authority: governments, political parties, religious movements and public opinion on whistle-blowing. During the major women's conferences (1975–1995), women's and civil society organizations had to negotiate support from their countries' official delegations. At the time, these delegations were often hostile or lacked awareness of the issues discussed around the question of women's rights. This was necessary to secure votes for the agreements that form the basis of the legal arsenal, serving as a reference at the international and national levels and which should lead to full citizenship rights. From the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women, the majority of States have adopted and ratified such conventions without major reservations, while unfortunately retaining the right not to implement them.

Citizenship, equality, parity

Full enjoyment of citizenship rights is certainly difficult for African women living in Africa (Imam and Kamminga, 2017). Citizenship encompasses a set of rights, of which parity in politics is a good example. Starting from a request for a quota in the late 1970s, the women of the world demanded parity, which was confirmed at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The debate around the difficulties in establishing and then enforcing parity is one of the many spaces where women in Senegal, Africa and the rest of the world are trying to write a new social contract, for greater gender equality and social justice, and the construction of an active citizenship.

We feel that it should no longer be necessary to discuss the importance of involving all individuals, as citizens, in politics, women included. However, the political space remains, on the whole, gender-blind, as Véronique Mottier, Léa Sgier and Thanh-Huyen Ballmer-Cao point out in their introduction to the book *Genre et politique: Débats et perspectives* [Gender and Politics: Debates and perspectives] (2000: 8). Women have only recently been afforded a stable position in the post-independence African political space.

In one country, Senegal, women's associations contributed to the 2002 constitutional reform, which introduced terms that push for parity: "All human beings are equal before the law. Men and women are equal in right. The law promotes the equal access of women and men to the mandates and functions (Art. 7)". Women and men have the equal rights to land possession and ownership (Art. 15); to access to education (Art. 22); and to employment, salary and taxes (Art. 25). As a result of the 2010 parity law, the number of women holding parliamentary seats increased from 22 per cent in 2007 to 43.3 per cent in 2012. When the law was adopted in 2010, it was widely contested in public opinion, the media, and political and religious circles. Religious associations, particularly Muslim ones, were the most open in expressing their opposition to a law favouring gender equality, which was deemed incompatible with Islamic principles. The Family Code still bears traces of this inequality: the man remains the head of the family, almost 50 years after the "secular" Family Code was enacted. In the 2014 local elections, a movement in Touba, a religious city and seat of a powerful Muslim brotherhood, refused to comply with the requirement for parity on the electoral lists, and was never sanctioned, as required by law. Several other municipalities breached the parity rules when establishing their councils, to the extent that the Association of Senegalese Women Lawyers had to support the complaints of female municipal councillors who had been banned from taking their seats.

If we look at other countries as an example, is it possible for African parliaments to oppose decisions made by the political authorities? The political contexts have been complex. The post-independence African State has been built as a strong institution, supported by the single-party and lifelong presidency system of power rotation. This authoritarian or even dictatorial system has led to a series of military coups that resurface periodically, as in Mali or Sudan. Organizing rebellions has been another way of destabilizing power in almost every state, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Liberia, from Egypt to Sierra Leone, from Central Africa to Côte d'Ivoire, from Mauritania to Algeria and Tunisia. We have recently witnessed a spiral of so-called jihadist violence that – from Libya to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; from Nigeria to Cameroon; and from Somalia to Sudan – is undermining state structures and leading to the exodus of populations fleeing the massacres. Women have suffered psychological and sexual violence, with their bodies used as areas of rivalry and weapons of war. Popular uprisings have led to national conferences, as in Benin in 1990, and episodes of alternation in Senegal in 2000. These advances in democratization, which attempted to establish transparent and sustainable institutions, have sometimes failed in the face of abusive constitutional revisions to allow third and tenth terms, as in Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Rwanda and Togo and currently in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.

Fundamentalisms and secularism

Other questions raise the same type of difficulties regarding the power balance between those in power and populations. We should remember how difficult it was for women's organizations – faced with political powers, party silence and religious pressure – to demonstrate openly against unjust provisions. In a secular republic, can citizenship be challenged by the religious imperative?

All the attacks on women's full citizenship rights in the name of culture and religion, at the political, economic and social levels, are concerning for feminist organizations. Society is complicit in these attacks.

In terms of religion, it is more useful to talk about religious culture than religion, Islam or Christianity. These attacks are often ignored, or legitimized, by the political sphere. In a society where religion and culture are deeply intertwined, the links between the state and religion, politics and the sacred are complex. Since independence, the Senegalese State has legislated in all areas, including the family. As a secular state, it has not included any religious provisions in the Constitution, the Labour Code or even the Penal Code. Only the Family Code (1972), which governs relations between men and women, contains such provisions, as if it were a matter of organizing

citizens' rights. A number of Muslim-inspired provisions have been removed during revisions between 1984 and 2014.

The rise of fundamentalisms in the world is an established reality. We cannot ignore them. The next section undertakes some analysis to highlight the obstacles to women's public and political participation, the attempts to control their bodies and rights, the freedom of which is a source of condemnation. We will use the Muslim context, as it is our field of study. The Christian context also has its specificities that could have been discussed, as in central and southern Africa.

The recent high-profile situation in Mali is a case in point. With the start of the Arab Spring and the Libyan crisis, "the political scene had completely changed in this northern and Saharan region of the African continent, revealing the complexity of the links between the state as a political institution, culture as a reference point for identity, and religion as both an institution and a reference point, whose 'sacred' word one is invited to (willingly or unwillingly) respect. Religion was a major issue in the various political crises" (Sow, 2018). The identity politics and political demands that fuelled the Malian crisis served to bring to light the struggles in northern Mali and to occupy cities such as Gao and Timbuktu. The "jihadists" took violent measures against the population by imposing a rigorous sharia law that deeply affected women:

> "Wearing the veil is compulsory for women; physical and sexual abuse, forced marriages and the introduction of temporary marriage known as pleasure marriage (*muta'a*); public flogging and stoning for adultery; amputation of hands and feet for theft; prohibition of coeducation in public spaces; suppression of leisure activities (radio and television programmes, music, balls, shows, sport, etc.); closure of hairdressing salons, bans on celebrating social events (weddings, baptisms, weekly women's meetings); introduction of codes on how to walk with the imposition of a dress code and even how to buy groceries; unannounced visits to ensure the good practice of prayer in mosques, in families and in public places; and reduced mobility of the population, especially of women and girls, etc." (Maïga, 2014:18).

For women's and feminist movements, confronting cultural fundamentalism is an already difficult task. Being accused of losing their African identity can easily undermine their credibility, making them look like westernized elites. But questioning the religious order is a source of physical and moral risk, as shown in *Gender and Fundamentalisms* (2018).

The religious culture and family laws that govern the status of women are so intertwined in countries that have made Islam a source of their legislation that any questioning can be equated with "blasphemy". Blasphemy is punishable by imprisonment or even death in countries such as Mauritania and Nigeria. One example is the campaign led by the Salafist Imam, Mahmoud Dicko, against the reform of the Family Code in Mali. Provisions related to the implementation of various international conventions and the Maputo Protocol had been rejected as contrary to the spirit of sharia law. Riots had broken out in the big cities and Bamako. The code, despite having already been voted in, was suspended *indefinitely*. It resurfaced a few months later, still under religious pressure, in a watered-down form. Conflicting debates on social issues are stopped as soon as a reference is made to the Koran, which serves as a sacred argument. As we are reminded, "this fear is not exclusive to women; it is lurking in the deafening silence of men who seem to have lost all critical perspective on the place of the religious in society. They are rarely heard discussing violations of women's rights and freedoms and violence against women in the name of culture and religion. We stay silent on television programmes when they introduce religious perspectives, where these things are not expected" (2018).

In contexts where Islam may dominate social discourse, two questions arise. Is it necessary to "reread" the sacred texts or to advance secularism to promote women's rights? Many women's associations, faced with evidence of gender inequalities in Muslim societies, condemn male

interpretations of the Koran and Muslim laws; they engage in a quasi-political debate with religious authorities to promote a fairer formulation of Muslim laws. It is true that this mostly happens in countries where their application is inevitable and becomes a critical issue. In a Nigeria where the manipulation of Islam is a crucial element of the political crisis, BAOBAB for Human Rights published *Women's Rights in Muslim Laws* (Imam, Fijabi and Akilu-Atta, 2005), to address the many questions Muslim associations were asking themselves in the face of cultural and religious fundamentalisms.

Hence the second question: in secular States, should we continue to refer to religious messages when they are used in legislation against women's rights? Can the religious identity of African Muslim women jeopardize their identity as citizens, which is at the heart of the democracy and modernity being built on the continent? How can we protect women from religious onslaught? Penda Mbow reminds us that the relationship between Islam and democracy is in terms [...] also of the need for separation of religion and state (2010: 3). Likewise, "for women, the secularization of the law, its emancipation from the literality of a sacred text that many exegetes show to internalize and claim to eternalize the prejudices of a patriarchal society, is the key to emancipation" (Peña-Ruiz, 2003: 260).

In modern times, defining secularism in African States is becoming increasingly complex, even though it is enshrined in their constitutions. Of course, not all secularism is the bearer of modernity and equal rights from the outset, and the State does not always guarantee gender equality for its citizens. Similarly, religion can also convey progressive values. Religion and politics in today's States are based on patriarchal values. Recent events around the (re)deployment of religion and the rise of fundamentalisms on the political stage, the effervescence of the Arab Spring and the religious radicalization of certain conflicts in West Africa have made the messages more complex, if not blurred. Following the example of Ghaleb Bencheikh (2005), in his reflections on *La laïcité au regard du Coran* [Secularism under the Koran], we can (along with a large number of women's organizations) ask "whether contemporary societies have really opted for a 'desacralization' of men's lives". The answers to this question are often uncertain, even ambiguous. Secularism, as mentioned above, does not necessarily lead to more modernity and equal rights; just as religion does not always perpetuate conservatism and archaism. Patriarchy is expressed in both. Political and religious power continue to be very closely related, but there are often slip-ups in secularism on the part of political elites, who make constant references to religion and religious people in a supposedly secular framework. The authorities take quasi-religious positions on societal issues considered sensitive, such as sexual and reproductive rights: sexuality, control and reduction of fertility, and abortion. Thus, in Senegal, despite the importance of the Muslim faith over the other faiths that coexist in the country, the state is not Muslim and has no official religion. The debate on the introduction of a personal status law under the Family Code, proposed in 2002 by associations of Islamic scholars, was certainly a moment of critical reflection by the Senegalese people on their individual and collective plans for society. But as an attempt to breach secularism, the initiators of the code – drawn up in the name of God – failed spectacularly.

Conclusion

Despite the many social changes, women are still trapped between the ordinary prejudices of communities, the religious arguments of submission, and the paradoxical decisions and attitudes of politicians, legitimized in the name of culture and religion. It is complicated to openly advance a strong feminist agenda. Feminist protests take place at all levels, from the demand to be included in political agendas to movements to combat gender-based violence. Recent examples include demonstrations related to the #metoo movement. Women activists, regardless of their degree of feminism, face multiple challenges in gaining full access to the public and political arena. Rights to greater dignity, equality and social justice, which the women's movement has fought hard to achieve at the local, national and international levels, are like species endangered by bad

governance processes, but also subverted by the rise of fundamentalisms of various kinds. No cultural revolution, no return to sources or to ethnic, religious or national authenticity demanded by groups that claim these are being abused can legitimize the persistence – permeated by idealization – of "traditional" values if they themselves are responsible for serious discrimination and inequality. Women have a duty to reconsider these values and to participate in the development of any social project. This right to speak and decide is fundamental. This is what this communication wanted to discuss, by presenting and analysing social changes and the role of organizations in their advancement projects.

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