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## Editorial: Media Activism, Sexual Expressions, and Agency in the Era of #MeToo

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## **Editorial:**

# Media Activism, Sexual Expressions, and Agency in the Era of #MeToo

**Bekeh Utietiang Ukelina**

Editor - Special Issue

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At an October 2016 press conference with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari said, "I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and living room and the other room." These comments were in response to the wife's interview a few days earlier with the BBC Hausa service critiquing her husband's cabinet and pledging not to support the husband's reelection unless there was a shakeup in the government. Her comments were amplified on social media because wives of Nigerian presidents usually do not criticize their husbands, even when their administrations are enmeshed in scandals. President Buhari's comments were problematic and painful to hear, and more so given that they were delivered while he was standing beside one of the most powerful women in the world. Does Angela Merkel also belong in the kitchen and the bedroom? The idea that the role of women is in the kitchen and bedroom

where they are to satisfy the needs of their children and spouses is primitive, inappropriate, and unworthy of being confined as relics in historical museums.

The problem is that sexism, homophobia, and all forms of gender discrimination remain patently a problem in our society. Sometimes, these are echoed in language and most times in policies and practices that remain deeply unjust. The erroneous stereotypes about women ingrained in our polity and economic systems have often led to the exclusion of women from positions of leadership. In 2015, Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, claimed that the reason he appointed only a few women to his cabinet is because of their inability to deal with political stress. There is no scientific basis for this claim. On the contrary, women like Merkel, Nancy Pelosi, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Dalia Grybauskaite, Indira Gandhi, Veronica Michelle Bachelet - to mention a few - have provided stable political leadership, often more successfully than their male counterparts.

Furthermore, misogynistic ideas often translate into bad policies that have social and economic consequences for women or people in the LGBTQIA+ communities. In the United States, women make only 85% of what men earn, and this gap is even more massive for women of color. This gender pay disparity is a loss of wages for work done by women, and it is a statement that women are not equal to men. If equality is the bedrock of our society, then women, men, people of color, differently abled people, and others should be provided equal treatment. Societies that promote systems of inequality between persons are creating cultures where abuses thrive, and people become dehumanized. It is these structures of inequality between the sexes that have led many powerful men and even some not so powerful men to feel they have the license to sexually assault, abuse, molest, or make women

uncomfortable in workplaces. These actions speak louder than words. They show disrespect toward women and say, 'you do not belong here as a professional, you are here at my pleasure.' Black, Brown, and Trans lives have been devalued and rendered disposable because of the institutionalization of inequalities, which is often informed by racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. A painful example is the number of Black people that police officers have killed without any provocations or just cause, and the way the legal system has acquitted these officers who should be wearing orange uniforms not law enforcement uniforms.

As horrendous as Buhari's comments were, they should not have come as a surprise to those who have been paying attention to the resurgence of heteropatriarchy around the globe and the toxic masculinities that accompanies it. This is often clouded in a faux nationalism that in the last few years has emerged in places like the United States, Russia, Hungary, Poland, the United Kingdom, etc. This patriarchal nationalist fervor has given credibility to leaders like Donald Trump and provided them cover for their misogyny and homophobia. America, a country steeped in evangelical puritanism and Roman Catholic conservatism, elected a man who repeatedly used crude and demeaning language to refer to women (called Ariana Huffington a dog and Rosie O'Donnell a pig) and boasted of sexually assaulting women. The election of a misogynist and a racist to the White House has given liberty to other right-wing anti-women organizations or political groups around the world to reassert themselves and to pass laws that restrict the rights of women. In the United States, Alabama and Missouri have passed laws severely restricting abortion rights; in Iran, women are being forced to wear the hijab and those who refuse are violently attacked and harassed; and, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán signed a decree banning gender studies programs.

Women have not remained silent in the face of these assaults on their rights and dignity. They have organized both online and offline, marched, and ran for offices. Media activism has been one of the most important sites of protest for women around the world. They have used the digital space to reclaim conversations about their lived experiences and to push for reforms or changes. From the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria to the #MeToo movement that started in the United States and soon spread throughout the world, media campaigns have captured the public imagination. They have forced many to grapple with the myriad and enduring oppressions women around the world face. The essays in this issue interrogate the intersection between media, activism, and social development, and they discuss issues of equality, representation, and agency.

The issue opens with Flávia Santos de Araújo's article, "*blessed within myself*": *The Prophetic Visions of our Lorde*. This essay focuses on Audre Lorde's prophetic vision of collective and inclusive liberation. Lorde's intersectional identity as a black woman, a mother, and a lesbian shaped her politics of justice and freedom. Araújo argues that Lorde's theory of difference and the need to build coalitions anticipated Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional theory. Another essential aspect of Lorde's work discussed in the article is her poetic vision and the power of erotic. Araújo posits that two pillars sustained Lorde's poetic vision: poetry as the light's source and the nurturer of this source of light. Lorde puts Black women at the center of their bodies and desires and sees erotic as a source of power to transform the world. Araújo concludes her essay writing, "I invoke Lorde's prophetic vision of a world that acknowledges all of our differences and contradictions, but that, at the same time, is able to wrap us all in an embrace."

Following Araújo's article is Jennifer Chisholm's essay, *Seduction as Power? Searching for Empowerment and Emancipation in Sex*

*Work*. Chisholm's essay asks the question, is sex work empowering or disempowering to sex workers? Drawing on ethnographic research in Brazil, she argues that the sex worker's power is the power to seduce, the ability to make potential clients willing to pay them for a sexual act. She says that seduction can be potentially empowering to women in a patriarchal society. Chisholm is careful to note that seduction while empowering to the individual cannot be emancipatory for all because of the link it has with patriarchy. Her article will elicit vigorous debates from feminists who see sex work as disempowering for women who often suffer violence, coercion, and poverty.

The article by Tori Arthur, *Sexual Real Estate: Repatriation, Re-territorialization and the Digital Activism of Nicole Amarteifo's Web Series An African City* focuses on a popular African YouTube show, *An African City*. Arthur argues that this show is the beginning of a "transnational televisual movement" that challenges false narratives about the African continent and African women. She notes that the young women featured in the show are free women who challenge and interrogate gender roles without any fear of being stigmatized by African society. The show is fascinating to study because of creator Nicole Amarteifo's portrayal of African female sexual desire. Amarteifo and her series is an excellent example of African women controlling both their stories and being media makers.

Then there is B Lee Aultman's article, *The Trans Complaint: Contributions to the Disagreement about Desire*. They argue that there is a need for new theories of transness in Trans Studies, or this discipline might face dissolution. In their essay, they analyze two unpublished texts found at the Transgender archive at the University of British Columbia: a poem, "Agony of the Transexual" and the text, "The Danish Training School." In different ways, these texts are transition narratives. The author notes that transitioning promises

something new and offers a “new sensoria,” however, no object of desire (including a vagina) can make one happy. The trans complaint, B Lee Aultman argues, is, in part, bourgeois and white, and rather than being restrictive, the trans community should be open to different narratives and stories no matter how complicated the results. The author powerfully concludes that they are not telling trans people to stop complaining but that they should accept the fact that they might “be let down by each other’s narrative as much as we might be lifted up by them.”

Following B Lee Aultman’s essay is the article by P. Jane Splawn. The author uses Tsitsi Dangarembga’s film “Everyone’s Child” to explore the complexities of “social/sexual” bonding among dispossessed young people in the urban and rural settings of Harare. Faced with the challenges of surviving in a society that fails to attend to their needs, these young people take their survival into their hands ‘by any means necessary,’ including selling cocaine or engaging in sex work. To survive, these youth forge bonds with each other, and the film portrays this in the homosocial desire between Itail and Charlie. In one of the scenes in the film, the two young men are seen blowing kisses by pressing their lips against the windshield of a car. Splawn argues that scenes like these open up the film to a “queer reading.” Splawn writes, “Itail’s windshield scene with Charlie can be interpreted as his’ refusal’ or ‘failure’ to adhere to the proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality.”

Chaumtoli Huq’s *Women’s “Empowerment” in the Bangladesh Garment Industry through Labor Organizing* is the last article of the issue. She challenges the prevailing narrative in development discourse that the garment industry brought liberation to Bangladeshi women. The government accepted this narrative because it helped drive cheap labor to the garment industry. Huq argues that this industry’s poor working, health, and living conditions created some

vulnerabilities for women. Sometimes, women in the industry have no control over their wages as these are handed to their male heads of households, limiting their material or socio-economic advances. Women in Bangladesh have responded by using trade unions to fight for better working conditions. The author posits that the success of women is limited by male dominance in the unions and their failure to make women's issues central to organizing. When women's issues such as maternity leave and promotion of women to supervisory roles are at the center of organizing, the participation of women in the union goes up. Huq concludes that women's issues should be integrated into the overall governance of trade unions and not be relegated to separate committees.

I gladly present you volume 20 of *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*.

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## RESUME

Bekeh Utietiang Ukelina holds a Ph.D. in History from West Virginia University, Morgantown and a Graduate Certificate in Digital Public Humanities from George Mason University. He is an Assistant Professor of History and the Associate Director of the Center for Gender and Intercultural Studies at the State University of New York, Cortland. His research examines the ideologies and practices of development in Africa, south of the Sahara. His most recent book, *The Second Colonial Occupation: Development Planning, Agriculture, and the Legacies of British Rule in Nigeria* won the 2018 NYASA Book Award.