

Coalition of African Lesbians

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Naming the roots of oppressive power and claiming freedom and autonomy

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As feminists and activists concerned with sexuality-related rights and gender justice, we know that current social, political and economic structures, institutions, ideologies and practices invade our freedom and restrict our autonomy. While we know the everyday effects of this lack of autonomy over our bodies and lives, we often do not name and make visible the causes of the problem. To use the analogy of a problem tree, we tend to focus on the branches, leaves and flowers of a tree (the effects, manifestations, symptoms) and not so much on the trunk and roots (causes, origins). To better understand what is happening on the African continent at the individual, structural and systemic level – and why – we need to identify and reflect critically on the root of the oppression, and unpack its workings in different contexts.

Drawing on recent feminist analysis, this fact sheet aims to name five causes of oppressive power prevalent in various parts of the world, including in Africa.

1. Heteronormativity and patriarchy
2. Militarisation and situations of conflict
3. Crises in the global economic order
4. Crises in democracy
5. Fundamentalisms

These five phenomena work in interconnected ways to curtail the lives and rights of women and gender diverse persons all over the globe. We explore the idea that though they are universally present, they take different forms in different contexts. By analysing the different contexts, we can better locate where oppressive power lies and develop strategies to shift, disrupt and undo systems of oppressive power in our personal lives and in our organising.

Understanding Context

For our purposes, context refers to the combined effect of all the different sites of power that exist in the environments we live and work in, which together sustain and justify oppression. When we speak of context, we are talking about the social, legal, economic, political and customary structures, institutions, ideologies practices that give power to some people and take it away from others. The different sites of power individually affect the way in which society operates and how people understand the world, and they act on and with each other to create systems or webs of oppression. As activists, it is important that we always think critically about the contexts in which we live, work and love. By analysing contexts (at the global, regional, national and local levels, historically and in the

present), we are able to better understand the barriers to and opportunities for achieving justice, autonomy and freedom.

To examine a context, therefore, one must take a step back from it and look at how the different sites of power relate to each other. For instance, religion often plays a significant role in shaping people's understanding of how women and men 'should' behave, but the influence of religion seldom works in isolation, operating only out of houses of worship; it is often integrated into family structures, school curricula and requirements, laws, government structures and practices and into cultural practices. In order to challenge oppression that is justified in the name of religion then, it is important that we are conscious of all the sites where religion as an oppressive power operates, how it manifests itself in our day-to-day lives, how it relates to other forms of oppression and also how our individual experiences are multiple, connected and intersecting, and invaded by different forms of oppressive power simultaneously and at different sites.

To get the clearest picture of a context, it is important that we consider more than laws, policies and institutions; we must also think about ideology – the set of shared social, political and cultural ideas, assumptions and values that are dominant in a society. For example, discussions about sexual and reproductive health should look at the laws that restrict choices (such as those banning abortion), the beliefs that underpin the laws (abortion as un-Christian or immoral) and the institutions or influential figures that spread these ideas (such as churches and community leaders).

Expanding our discussion of context in this way helps us to uncover aspects of a culture and society that oppress women as well as people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression. For instance, we are taught from a very young age that women and men have different roles in society; men are supposed to be strong, assertive and dominant, and, therefore, are considered to be 'naturally' inclined towards and skilled at leadership roles; women are, supposedly, emotional, caring and submissive, and therefore 'naturally' inclined towards domestic responsibilities. This belief – and the values or virtues that are linked to it (a 'good' woman is monogamous, married, obedient and quiet) – is shaped, upheld and promoted by religious leaders, in schools, in the mainstream media, in laws and through many other factors. Taken together, these factors create a particular context.

Oppressive violence infiltrates all aspects of public and private life, and so we must seek to understand how and why this happens. By looking closely at contexts, we can better understand how different sites of power work together to create a pattern of injustices. An analysis of context thus enables us to see *systems* of oppression rather than individual instances of what is often called 'human rights violations'. For example, a context analysis can help us to better understand the cultural, social, economic and legal factors that work together to stop individuals who are classified as girls in a

society from attending school or encourage cultures of violence against gender non-conforming people.

Even when one characteristic or attribute seems to be dominant or the sole site of contention in a person's life, it is important to recognise that contexts are always complex and overlapping and that it is a mistake to fragment our experiences of oppression into isolated individualised struggles emanating from a singular site of power – a strategy that results in divisive, identity-based politics.

In the sections that follow, five causes of oppression as witnessed in various contexts are discussed in relation to two questions: (1) What does this mean? (2) How does this manifest?

1. Heteronormativity and patriarchy

What does this mean?

Patriarchy refers to the social, cultural, economic, ideological and legal systems that sustain male privilege and dominance in private and public spheres. Heteronormativity refers to the simultaneous privileging of heterosexuality and imposition of the gender binary in order to preserve male privilege and maintain unequal gender relations. On the one hand, it is based on the assumption that heterosexuality is natural, normal and moral, and that all other forms of sexuality are unnatural, abnormal and immoral; on the other, on the assumption that gender is dichotomous and all people are naturally feminine or masculine. Of course, femininity and masculinity are aligned with the sex binary so that men are supposed to be masculine and not feminine, and vice versa for women. However, heteronormativity in the form of the gender binary also operates in non-heterosexual relationships that mimic the gender division of heterosexual relationships. Thus, lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgender people can also be heteronormative if they follow strict codes of gender-based behaviour in their relationships, sexual and otherwise.

Heteronormativity rigidly defines what it is to be female or male, and also argues that these gendered roles and behaviours are natural and hardwired, based on a person's biology, rather than a result of social structures or pressures. For instance, many people believe that all women want to get married and have children simply because of their biological sex, rather than understanding that women are taught from birth to act and think in a certain way, including to desire marriage and children.

Heteronormative assumptions and beliefs infiltrate all aspects of life, and influence how people understand sexuality, gender and relationships. 'Good' and 'normal' sex is tied to reproduction and socially sanctioned (i.e., married) heterosexual relationships. Other forms or expressions of sexuality and gender identity are positioned as bad and unnatural, and this belief is used to justify homophobia, transphobia and other forms of oppression, such as the criminalisation of sex work or restrictions on women's reproductive rights. As noted above, because of the predominance of heteronormativity in all societies, people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression are not immune to its ideological influence simply by virtue of their sexual orientation and gender expression.

The power of patriarchy and heteronormativity stems from an illusion of naturalness. However, both patriarchy and heteronormativity are socially created – that is, dominant social structures, institutions and cultural practices teach and reinforce these oppressive ideas about sex and gender.

How does this manifest?

Heteronormativity and patriarchy both seek to stop certain people from exercising autonomy and from achieving equality, dignity and freedom. Both systems of oppression work to preserve the dominance of men, particularly heterosexual men, by denying power to women, gender-diverse persons and LGBTI persons. By promoting certain ideas about gender and sex, heteronormativity and patriarchy create the illusion that gender is fixed and biological. Heteronormative and patriarchal notions can be found at all levels of society; some of the manifestations are obvious and public (such as legislation limiting women's access to healthcare or education), while others are more hidden or ideological (such as the common belief that 'boys will be boys', when boys and men harass and exploit girls and women and that 'good girls are seen but not heard').

Heteronormativity and patriarchy are crucial and sustaining factors in gender based violence, homophobia and transphobia. In South Africa, for example, people who are seen to transgress gender or sexual norms often face various forms of violence as punishment. Perpetrators of sexual assault specifically target people who are regarded as not conforming to gender and sexual norms, and use violence as a means of regulating, controlling and disciplining the 'problem' bodies. The targeted rape of lesbians, for instance, or of any woman who rejects sexual overtures from a man can be understood as an aggressive assertion of hetero-patriarchal power; they serve as a warning to women not to break the rules. Those who commit these crimes feel entitled (as men) to control women's bodies and to punish supposedly unnatural behaviours.

The lack of accountability or justice for these crimes also stems from patriarchal ideologies. The male dominated criminal justice system, combined with strong cultural investments in hetero-patriarchal power, produces a legal context in which sexuality- and gender-motivated violence is dismissed, ignored or condoned. The refusal to respond adequately to the rape epidemic in South Africa represents an unstated acceptance that women, persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression are not entitled to autonomy or control over their own bodies. Because hetero-patriarchy works powerfully through ideological conditioning, simply ensuring greater numbers of female lawyers and judges will not automatically limit its influence, as women and persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression are also trained to internalise and uphold these ideologies.

This is only one example of how heteronormativity and patriarchy manifest in society. The influence of these ideologies can be seen in all aspects of life, both public and private – from discriminatory legislation and cultural practices to family violence, workplace discrimination and unequal access to support services.

2. Militarisation and situations of conflict

What does this mean?

Militarisation refers to the process by which military values, attitudes, institutions and behaviours come to have an increasing influence over a society. This may take the form of actual military presence (such as in the expanding number of US military bases all over Africa often in partnership with local governments), special laws (such as a leader of state being able to act without government approval or authorisation), restrictive regulations (such as movement curfew or security checkpoints), propaganda (such as valorising the role of the military in protecting national interests or incentives to join the military), media censorship (such as not reporting on rights violations committed by military personnel) or the forced movement of people (such as for ostensible reasons of national security in order to capture valuable land or other resources).

Militarisation usually precedes a state of conflict – that is, it begins when a nation is organising against an external or internal ‘threat’. Some aspects of militarisation continue during and after periods of conflict, and can have a long-term legacy in society. Sometimes, a society is increasingly militarised under the pretext of national threats that never materialise, resulting in a normalising of a militarised state (such as often happens in border towns between countries) or has hyper-militarised sections (such as commercial districts, government offices, embassies), again normalising the presence of heavy weaponry and an environment of fear and conflict. The hyper-arming of police personnel also threatens to blur the distinction between an ostensibly protective police force and a defensive army.

‘Situations of conflict’ is a broad term referring to any period of hostility or instability; it can refer to countries engaged in war against one or more states, internal armed conflicts, separatist struggles or low-intensity conflicts. Situations of conflict are often accompanied by a breakdown of law enforcement mechanisms and an inability or unwillingness of governments to address violations committed by the police, military or other state actors. This leaves the civilian population – particularly marginalised groups – vulnerable to further attack.

Both militarisation and conflict are characterised by an increased presence of force and violence in everyday life. There is also often military or paramilitary influence over decision-making processes.

How does this manifest?

Militarisation and situations of conflict pose an immediate danger to civilian populations and are almost always accompanied by rights violations. Already vulnerable sectors of society, such as women, persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression, are often targets of

physical and sexual assault. The unchecked actions of police and military in such environments also lead to widespread abuses of power and restrict avenues for redress.

The ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provides a shocking example of how sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. The almost ritualised use of sexual violence against women – through mutilation, rape and sexual slavery – is designed to instil fear in the community at large. There are also many reports of activists who work with survivors of violence being threatened with rape or death. These threats are intended to stop activists from exposing the military's widespread campaign of sexual violence. Because of the militarised context (i.e., the heavy involvement of the military in all aspects of life) survivors of violence have little recourse to report these crimes or seek justice. Highly charged militarised environments such as in the DRC create a permissive context for rights violations, with the military and other state actors effectively granted impunity. Indeed, rape and sexual violence have come to be standard weapons of war. In the 100 days of the Rwandan genocide, for instance, up to 500,000 women may have been raped. The DRC and Rwandan examples discussed here are only two instances of conflict-based rights violations – similar horrors take place all over the world, every day.

As noted above, militarisation can take place both before or after a conflict, and often has a strong legacy after hostilities have ended. The remilitarisation of the South African police force, a process that began in 2010, offers an example of how military values and behaviours can create oppressive environments or encourage violence. While originally depicted as a necessary step to ensure 'command and control' within the service – ostensibly to allow the police to better combat violent criminals – the re-militarisation process is regarded by many as having led to increasingly repressive police responses. Recent violent actions by the police have led activists to suggest that the government is waging war on the public through the police. The Independent Police Investigations Directorate has recorded a substantial rise of deaths in custody as well as reports of abuse and torture perpetrated by police personnel. There have also been a number of police-related deaths at public protests, suggesting that police are using unnecessary force and lethal crowd control tactics. These factors suggest that the South African police force is reverting to its apartheid role as the brute enforcer of oppressive state power.

3. Crises in the global economic order

What does this mean?

The global economic order refers to the capitalist system now found across much of the world. Since the late 1970s, more and more nations have adopted a neoliberal economic approach, often through being bullied and held hostage by powerful countries in the global North and their tools in the form of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This is a system in which governments have minimal involvement in economic affairs, instead promoting privatisation, deregulation, the dismantling of social welfare structures and public assets, free trade and open markets.

Neoliberalism is closely related to globalisation, which refers to the increasing economic, trade and cultural links between different countries. The current form of globalisation is based on and benefits from unequal power relationships and neoliberal economic policies that cause certain countries to become richer while others become poorer. As a result, poorer countries become increasingly dependent on richer ones and further subject to neoliberal 'reforms'.

Globalisation and the dominance of neoliberal economic structures and processes also exert an increasing influence of ideas about society, culture and wealth accumulation; thus, people all over the world are trained to dream the same dream that is responsible for their poverty and powerlessness.

Because neoliberalism and globalisation force some countries to be dependent on others, they often lead to political, economic and social instability. In doing so, these systems limit or undermine residents' ability to exert their freedom and agency. The absence of in-country regulation also results in a growing wealth gap between the haves and the have-nots. As finance capital and corporations from Western Europe and North America find it increasingly easier to travel to and colonise different parts of the world, and as national borders become important only for keeping 'undesirable' (read poor) people out, class difference and alliance supersede national identity to a large extent, with the wealthiest members of a country having more in common with the wealthy in other parts of the world than with the poorer people of their own country.

'Crises in the global economic order' refers to the negative impacts that come about because of neoliberalism, globalisation and unfettered capitalism. These include examples of countries being plunged into debt and becoming crippled by loan repayment agreements. Market domination by large corporations also leads to job losses, a decrease in wages and poor working conditions. In some cases, democratic structures and social support services are weakened by the growing influence of corporate culture and values. These impacts worsen existing inequalities, create economic insecurity and spread poverty.

How does this manifest?

Economic uncertainty and exploitation predictably leads to social crisis, with vulnerable populations often experiencing heightened violence, crime and exploitation. High unemployment rates and insufficient workplace regulations lead to appalling work conditions and badly paid (often temporary) jobs. This has the further effect of lowering living standards and limiting access to basic resources for the majority while a small minority benefit and work to keep the exploitative economic system in place.

Actions taken by global economic structures have very real impacts on the lives of people in developing countries, and particularly on the lives of women and other marginalised groups. A good example of this is the effect of the structural adjustment policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a condition for receiving loans. Countries seeking an IMF loan are forced to allow privatisation of public sector services and goods, remove price controls and cut civil and welfare services, often leading to massive unemployment among women (who are the first to lose their jobs in a patriarchal society that sees men as primary breadwinners and women as homemakers) and a decrease in wages. Women are pushed out of the formal job market and forced to seek work in the least profitable and unprotected sectors of the urban economy, mostly in activities that rely on domestic skills. Increasing competition for products or services (through an increase in supply) forces informal workers to lower their prices, shrinking their already meagre earnings. When employed in formal sectors, women are also paid less than men for performing the same jobs as men, again because men are considered to have families to support.

The power of global corporations leads to exploitation of the poor and undermines people's ability to exercise autonomy or to live with dignity. One of the most well-known examples is the aggressive targeting of African women by the Swiss company Nestlé, which falsely advertised its baby formula as a healthy alternative to breastfeeding. The company targeted women in developing countries for a number of reasons, including the lack of advertising regulations, women's limited access to healthcare and unstable working conditions. This marketing campaign – designed to increase profits at the expense of the health of women and children– led to widespread malnutrition and the deaths of countless babies across the continent.

The Coca-Cola conglomerate has also committed numerous rights violations – particularly in the developing world – in the name of profit. The market leader in the global bottled water industry, Coca-Cola privatises crucial water sources and then turns this limited natural resource into a commodity. Water is packaged (at a huge cost to the environment) and sold back to those rich enough to afford it. This has a huge impact on women and girls, who in many parts of Africa are responsible for sourcing

water. The commodification process forces women to walk ever-increasing distances to find water, a situation that places them under more pressure and at greater risk of sexual or physical violence. The privatisation of water also threatens the livelihoods of many women due to drought and other environmental impacts.

4. Crises in democracy

What does this mean?

The word democracy is derived from ancient Greek and means 'rule of the people'. It is a system of government in which citizens and other residents are able to engage (either directly or indirectly) in the creation of laws, usually through representatives elected on their behalf.

'Crises in democracy' refers to situations in which governance for the public good is weak, ineffective or otherwise under threat; in such situations, the government is unable or unwilling to protect the human rights of its residents, and sometimes itself actively and deliberately commits rights violations. The absence of key democratic structures (such as a free media, fair elections processes and an independent criminal justice system) produces an environment in which people who speak out against the repressive regime are silenced, attacked, murdered or otherwise repressed.

Democracy can also be undermined by corrupt practices or third-party influence, particularly from other governments and private corporations. For instance, governments may sell or exploit resources in a way that benefits corporations' high-paid staff and shareholders rather than serve the people or the public good. Crises in democracy are often accompanied by violence. This can be state-sanctioned violence (usually through the police or military) or other forms of violence that the state is unable or unwilling to control (such as paramilitaries, gangs and organised crime).

Even in times of relative stability, weak democracies are characterised by unnecessary use of force by police, discriminatory laws or policies, and a lack of accountability for leaders' illegal conduct. Countries that appear and claim to be beacons of democracy can also lack democratic structures and processes; the role of the media cannot be stressed enough here, as one of its key jobs is to keep the government answerable to the people.

How does this manifest?

States are considered democratic not just because elections are held, but also because institutions and policies are in place to safeguard basic rights. Crises in democracy are accompanied by an erosion of these protections (and, in some cases, the introduction of repressive legislation), with residents often subjected to police harassment, arbitrary detention and unfair trials.

An example of this is the frequent harassment faced by social justice activists in Zimbabwe. With reports of election rigging, state-sponsored violence and corruption, Zimbabwe is widely regarded as a state in crisis. Activists and political opponents face a constant threat of attack when exercising their democratic rights. Since 2000, the country has faced a massive economic decline, especially in relation

to access to food, water, healthcare, electricity and education, and this has had a disproportionate impact on women (who are the primary caregivers). Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), a movement founded in response to women's limited access to basic goods and services, draws attention to this situation through peaceful protest and lobbying of government officials. Since the organisation's launch, its members have suffered detention without charge and other forms of illegal treatment. They have been subjected to harassment and assault by police officers, including physical abuse while in custody. The movement's members, including those with babies and children, have been arrested or charged under repressive legislation that restricts freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

Similarly, members of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) are frequently targeted by police because of their social justice work. In late 2013, the organisation's office was raided, not for the first time, by the police, and members subjected to harassment, assault and arrest. Unlawful raids are intended to put pressure on activists and to illustrate the strength of the state (i.e., the government's willingness to compromise democratic practices).

Both the examples above demonstrate a 'crisis of democracy', specifically the erosion of basic rights and a breakdown in democratic structures (such as the criminal justice system).

5. Fundamentalisms

What does this mean?

Fundamentalism refers to a rigid adherence to extreme, narrow and often unjust and unrepresentative ideas by people as a means of gaining and maintaining power. These ideas can relate to culture, religion, ethnicity or nationalism, but their defining feature is that they are considered natural, unchanging and closed to questioning. Fundamentalist beliefs are based on and foster unequal power relationships; those in power can decide the 'truth' and those without power must follow.

Fundamentalist ideologies offer a simplistic and fixed reading of the world, and a critical feature of fundamentalisms of any kind is the near complete repression of disagreement or nonconformity with the propounded ideology. Fundamentalist beliefs are used to justify exclusion, imprisonment, mistreatment, torture, rape and murder. Activists and other people who question the legitimacy of those in power or who do not adhere to prescribed standards of behaviours may face attack or other forms of punishment. Because they offer a fixed world view, fundamentalist beliefs are heavily invested in maintaining power; leaders consider themselves justified in using extreme force to silence dissent, obstruct change and limit autonomy.

How does this manifest?

It is the closed nature of fundamentalist beliefs that makes them dangerous; because fundamentalist attitudes and ideologies are difficult to challenge and articulated as the Truth, those in power can exert control freely and without question. At the heart of any fundamentalism is a desire to ensure that power remains with a few people (almost always men).

Religious fundamentalism has an enormous impact on our ability to attain freedom, equality and dignity. In many parts of the continent, leaders spout hateful rhetoric as a way of attacking and disempowering women, persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression. These fundamentalist beliefs are also sometimes influenced, shaped or supported by external parties with a vested interest in maintaining oppressive power structures. For instance, the recent backlash against homosexuality in Uganda is in many ways due to the work of US-based evangelical groups. Controversial figures such as Scott Lively have had considerable influence over official and public attitudes towards homosexuality in Uganda. Lively and others continue to preach a doctrine designed to foster homophobia; they argue that homosexuality is unquestionably wrong because it breaks the supreme laws of God and that homosexual people are therefore deserving of extreme punishment. By promoting a fundamentalist view of Christianity and homosexuality, these religious leaders have created an extremely hostile context in which social justice conversations are effectively prohibited.

A similar situation is emerging in parts of northern Nigeria, where sharia law allows for the death penalty for homosexual conduct. In this context, an individual's freedom and autonomy is irrelevant in the face of 'divine' law.

Bringing it all together

Although it is useful to examine contexts using any of the five lenses discussed above, it is also crucial to consider them holistically, to look at the bigger picture. These five factors are almost always interconnected and it is important that we think about how they relate to each other.

The recent anti-same-sex marriage legislation in Nigeria offers a good example of how different factors work together to create a repressive context. We can gain a better understanding of why this legislation has popular support, particularly at this point in time, if we consider all the different elements that make up the context.

Nigeria's Criminal Code Act of 1990 already outlaws a range of sexual and other conduct that directly and indirectly violate the rights of persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression, including the infamous criminalisation of 'unnatural offences' ('carnal intercourse against the order of nature') – which is the legacy of British colonial rule; further, various states within the federation have additional laws that effectively restrict the mobility, livelihood options and right to self-expression of persons with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression. However, despite the already repressive legal atmosphere, Nigeria recently passed a new law prohibiting same-sex marriage and providing harsh penalties for advocating for sexual orientation and gender identity and expression related rights. As the analysis by such organisations as Women Living Under Muslim Laws shows, such repressive moves are made by politicians to gain 'political traction' and as symbolic declarations of self-determination and independence from the West. Thus, anti-colonial rhetoric is used to justify the expansion of repressive laws and also, arguably, to deflect attention from political and economic crises. For instance, it is no secret that Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigerian president who signed the anti-same-sex marriage bill into law in early 2014 also faced significant protests and civil unrest when he attempted to remove the fuel subsidy, as part of Nigeria's neoliberal reforms and had to partially back down. As evident from the example of several African countries in recent years (such as Senegal, Uganda and Malawi), gender and sexuality issues serve as useful distractions and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expression present as useful scapegoats in times of social and economic unrest.

A repressive context is rarely caused by just one factor; on the contrary, a number of elements (laws, fundamentalisms, weak democratic structures and economic decline) combine to create an environment in which oppression flourishes. It is for this reason that context analysis is important; for us to disrupt oppressive power, we must understand all the structures, institutions and beliefs that work together to create and sustain it.

Notes and acknowledgements

The framework here has been taken from the *Global Report on the Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders* (2012) published by the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRDIC), available at

http://defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WHRD_IC_Global-Report_2012.pdf

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