Finding colleagues, finding home, finding energy: Rethinking African feminist engagements with international politics through vernacular rights cultures. Reflections from a study of pro-abortion activism and allyship.

**Abstract**

African feminist pro-choice abortion activism and political mobilisation is shaped by colonial legacies in a multitude of ways. A key area where the sustained colonialist dynamics is visible is in the relationship between pro-choice abortion activists and organisations funded by and/or located in the Global North. How activists in the African space navigate these relationships and infrastructures has been a sustained site of critique within decolonial and post-colonial literature. However, accounts from pro-choice abortion activists and allies working on abortion access in Africa, particularly those working in and with communities, are limited. As a result, Afrofeminist experiences of and perspectives on navigating transnational pro-choice abortion activist infrastructures are invisibilised. This paper centres these perspectives and interrogates the complex reasons why and process through which African pro-choice abortion activists and allies navigate transnational collaborations. Through centring activist and allies’ contributions and Afrofeminist perspectives, we contend that African pro-choice activists strategically engage with international collaborations to challenge anti-abortion politics that have gained traction in the African postcolony where abortion has been positioned as ‘un-African’. The paper highlights the need for conversations on relationships between the different actors in pro-choice abortion activism to centre African feminist voices and work from Afrofeminist perspectives.

Keywords: abortion activism, Africa, vernacular rights cultures, post-colonial politics, Afrofeminist

**Introduction**

Unequal relations of power, rooted in colonial legacies, shape, circulate within and are reproduced by global sexual and reproductive health agendas in the African post-colonial context[[1]](#footnote-1). Pronounced technologies of government within the African space include dependency on Global North international aid donors to support healthcare systems. This problem has been addressed in literature on philanthrocapitalism as part of colonialist political legacies. As the relationship between Global North and Global South[[2]](#footnote-2) subjects (including international non-governmental organisations, States, and civil society actors) is characterised by reliance on Global North investment in health systems, Global North actors can directly influence Global South public policy through prioritising Global North “diagnoses and prognoses” (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019: 857). As Udegbunam (2020) argues, this is a form of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965). While African post-colonial countries have “all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality [...] its political policy is directed from outside” (Udegbunam, 2020: 69).

Global North imaginings of what the central sexual and reproductive health (SRH) problems of the Global South are, as well as how these should be resolved, manifest in Global South governments’ SRH priorities, reflecting this neocolonial influence (Suh, 2021). The sustainability of SRH projects is also affected. At time of writing, the neocolonial effects of aid funding on abortion policy in Africa has again resulted in the closure of abortion care services or withdrawal from pro-abortion advocacy. Global North right-wing governments and donors are adopting explicitly anti-abortion positions. Among the first policy interventions by the US second Trump administration, informed by the ultraconservative Project 2025 agenda, included the disestablishment of USAID, one of the largest funders of SRH services, on grounds of promoting radical ideologies.

There is ample literature outlining how civil society actors in the SRH space, and in abortion particularly, are subjugated and constrained by international collaborations and networks in the post-colonial context (Yamin et al, 2017; Suh, 2021). However, scholarly writing detailing how pro-abortion activists in the African space respond to or navigate post-colonial politics using empirical data from activists and allies is limited. It is vital that research documenting interventions undertaken by activists and allies working in spaces and places marked by colonialism is amplified. The need to write about activisms outside the Global North is widely accepted in feminist political scholarship, particularly that influenced by postcoloniality and decoloniality. Feminist academic research and writing has taken up this challenge and the field of abortion research has seen a significant increase in writings from and about the Global South, particularly Latin America and the Caribbean (Atienzo et al, 2024; Sutton and Vacarezza, 2021). The instrumentalist reasons for this – to underscore the work of activities and allies and to challenge both colonialist silencing of the Global South and colonialist constructions of specific voices in the Global South as vulnerable or silenced – are well documented (Vazquez, 2009; Mignolo, 2012; Mohanty, 1988, 2003; Tamale, 2020).

The work of pro-abortion activists is illuminative in relation to the complexities of resistance, which is conscious of neo and decoloniality, in the African post-colony. Anti-abortionism has gained traction in the post-colonial African space as heterosexist and patriarchal politics are constructed as emblematic of pre-colonial African cultural authenticity (Boyce-Davis, 2014; Ossome, 2020; Tamale, 2020) by political elites embedded in anti-colonial and independence movements. Abortion, queerness, and non-heteronormativity are presented by conservative political elites in the African postcolony as ‘un-African’ (Ochiabuto and Ugwuja, 2023) and part of “Westernised threats to ‘traditional African society’” (Vorholter, 2012: 295).

To develop this argument, we draw on Sumi Madhok’s vernacular rights cultures framework. Resonant with Roy (2023), Lewis (2008), Tembo (2022) and others, Madhok (2017) proposes that the limitations or absence of discursive deconstructions of Global South politics is because the locus of enunciation of the logics, histories, and positionalities orientating and shaping relations between subjects is the Global North. The mobilisations of Global South actors are not fully engaged with because their decisions are examined and interpreted in relation to the effects of (neo)colonial and neoliberal discourses formed in the Global North (Hearn, 2007 typifies this form of analysis). Dunford and Madhok (2015) attribute the challenge to the persistent dominance of a ‘politics of origins’ which analyses the discourses of the Global South using frameworks which, even in their refusal to valorise the Global North or only document experiences within the Global North, position politics as “western derived” and “[owing] their formulation to the […] modern west” (Dunford and Madhok, 2015: 5). This argument is expanded in Madhok’s (2017) concept of ‘vernacular rights cultures’ which she presents to remedy the approach to transnational human rights-analysis which underscores the benefits, application, challenges, translation, and refutation of Global North rights in the Global South.

Vernacular rights cultures is an analytic approach that consciously avoids foreclosing the idea that Global South mobilisations utilise international infrastructures as they constitute political imaginaries shaped by the local. This, Madhok argues, is different from area-specific or regional-/local-level analysis common within rights scholarship which either interrogates the operation and reformation of discourses emanating from the Global North or describes how Global South actors resist the logics of Global North infrastructures. An example of this approach to interrogation is reflected in Michael’s (2004) analysis of the need to reform transnational, non-governmental organisation collaborations between the Global North and African space so the locus of control moves from the Global North to the Global South. Madhok troubles this approach, as it retains the beginning point as the Global North. Meaningful analysis of the political, according to Madhok, needs to ensure that its starting position is what is authored and emanates from the Global South and cannot presuppose that the generative, decolonial local will not actively engage with international infrastructures as part of their transformative work. There are resonances between this latter argument and discussions within postcolonial and decolonial literature on strategic usage and affirmative sabotage (Dhawan, 2014; Colpani et al, 2022). Vernacular rights cultures takes a step further in that it begins from insights, conceptual frames, and ontological conversations rooted in and directly engaging with the histories, cultures, realities, imaginaries and discourses in the Global South.

Madhok advocates for vernacular rights cultures for two key reasons. First, as a means of engaging with contestations that are not replicated or present within the Global North. Second, to move away from an analysis of international politics, in Madhok’s case human rights politics, in relation to the imposition, vernacularisation, or refutation of Global North rights frameworks on and in the Global South. Analyses which follow this line of thought, Madhok argues:

…suffer from a significant conceptual difficulty: they operate within and actively reproduce the binaries of the epistemic - authorial global *versus* the nonepistemic translating local - and thereby foreclose agency and authorship of rights from elsewhere, not least the margins (Madhok, 2017: 502)

Instead, ‘vernacular rights cultures’ approaches rights politics visible within the Global South as produced by subjects whose experiences are influenced by multiple histories, cultures, norms and ideologies. This includes, but is not limited to, colonisation. The political discourses circulating and woven through North-South as well as South-South interactions are manifestations of the suturing of these location-based histories, cultures, norms and ideologies into the global. Madhok’s intervention challenges both readings of transnational collaborations between Global North and Global South actors as only reflecting neocolonial governmentality (Ong, 1999; Hearn, 2007; Beyuo et al, 2023) and, implicitly, of all South-South collaborations as positive (Roy, 2023). Political mobilisations authored by the Global South can include collaborations with Global North actors. If political mobilisations include such collaborations, they are the result of strategic decision-making in relation to the political objectives emerging from the Global South, not solely Global South actors’ acquiescence with, subversion of, or ignorance to a neocolonial political order (for more on the multiple interpretations of Global North-Global South actors’ relations see: Colpani et al, 2022; Dhawan, 2014).

This paper aims to operationalise Madhok’s framework in relation to the work of pro-abortion rights groups in the African space. Its main interest is in interrogating what accounts from pro-abortion activists and allies in Africa about their work can tell us about why and how they utilise international networks and spaces using ontological perspectives that have emerged from the vernacular cultures of the African space. Following Madhok, our interest is how knowledges, concepts, and histories are reflected in the practices of actors in the Global South, recognising that colonialism is an important part of these histories, without limiting how we think or conceive the practices of actors in the Global South to colonial matrices of power (Mignolo, 2007) or persistent technologies of control developed by and emanating from the Global North. This interest led us to interpret empirical accounts of activists and allies’ work through an Afrofeminist conceptual lens influenced by the work of Tamale (2008, 2020), Ossome (2008) and Boyce-Davis (2014). Importantly this approach is not a rejection or opposition to decolonial or postcolonial analysis. Some interpretations are resonant with these conceptual lenses. The nuance is that they consciously adopt an analytic posture that starts from and directly engages with the lived and living context of the African postcolony (Mbembe, 2001a and 2001b).

In short, we aim to explain the strategic decision-making of pro-abortion/pro-choice abortion activists and allies working within a particular context “with their eyes open” (Tamale, 2008) using conceptual lenses developed by and from an Afrofeminist perspective. This context is bears traces of coloniality, philantrocapitalism, and NGOization (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013) alongside Afroculturalism (Oyěwùmí, 1997) and anti-abortionist manipulation of African authenticity (Chiweshe and Macleod, 2018). The paper begins with a brief methodology, then relays participants’ accounts of why and how they use international collaborations and infrastructures. It contends that these accounts indicate that pro-abortion/pro-choice abortion activists navigate international collaborations and infrastructures strategically to facilitate a transformative engagement with abortion politics in the post-colonial African context.

**Methodology**

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 15 individuals involved in abortion rights activism and feminist organizing across 11 different African countries (Appendix 1). We focused on activists and allies associated with the Mobilizing Activists around Medication Abortion (MAMA) Network (<https://mamanetwork.org/>). One of the participants worked exclusively in a transnational capacity, without a specific focus on a single country. The interviews ranged in length from 41 to 68 minutes, with an average duration of 54 minutes. All participants were selected based on their leadership roles within their organization, with many having either founded or currently holding leadership positions. We intentionally did not collect detailed individual information, such as gender or other personal characteristics, to maintain a focus on the professional and activist perspectives provided and to ensure that participants were not identifiable, a particular safety concern in relation to pro-choice abortion activism in the African space. All invited participants (n=16) agreed to be interviewed, although one interview could not be conducted due to scheduling conflicts. There were no refusals to participate in the study.

All of the interviews were conducted in English from December 2021 to March 2022 over Zoom, involved two interviewers, and used a question guide [available on request] developed by the authors. The interviews addressed topics including experiences of, and motivations for, abortion activism including national and / or international activism. Two-interviewer interview approaches are established, although rarely used, in the social sciences (Velardo and Elliott, 2021). The research team includes two people with “insider” professional experience of working with and for the MAMA network, with established high levels of trust for interviewees; two authors are experienced researchers of abortion and “outsiders” to the MAMA network. Our two-interviewer approach ensured that each interview was conducted by a combination of an insider with an established connection with the respondent, and an outsider. We used this approach for three main reasons, grounded in our feminist approach to this research. First, established trust between interviewees and one of the interviewers was critical to reassuring interviewees about the purpose, conduct and use of the interviews. For activists working in the abortion space, especially - but not only - those working in legally restrictive contexts, agreeing to participate in research is fraught with danger (e.g. of exposure - of themselves and/or their work). One interviewer known and trusted by the respondent was essential to reassure the interviewee about the purpose of our work and the safety of their participation. The inclusion of a second interviewer who was not known by the respondent, working with a known interviewer, helped to facilitate a conversation-like encounter and allow for flexibility in the pursuing and following up of participant responses. Second, the two insider interviewers had less research interview experience than the outsider interviewers offering opportunities for less experienced researchers to observe and learn qualitative interview practice, for example, to ask probing questions and to follow respondent-led direction of the conversation. Third, the two insider interviewers had greater situated professional knowledge of the MAMA network and the challenges facing the network’s activists and allies. Our research practice pro-actively recognises the value of this knowledge and integrated it in our data collection process.

Informed consent was completed verbally before each interview, allowing space for any questions or clarifications. Interviewees were purposely sampled from known networks of activist groups in Africa; all respondents were over the age of 18, and no gender conditions were placed on participation. Our sampling strategy was deliberative for maximum difference, including broad regional geography, country-level abortion legality restrictiveness, organizational focus, and type of work (advocacy, abortion referral, self-managed abortion provision, hotline). We did not seek to cover each combination of categories; a quantitative sensibility to sample size selection is inconsistent with qualitative research and thematic analysis and the logic of a "smaller, more deeply interrogated sample" (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethics permeate our project; our decision to conduct these interviews was driven by an imperative to make visible the work of African feminist abortion activists. As a research team we grappled with our insider and outsider statuses and individual positionalities; through the interview process and analyses we sought to consider our positionalities and how our personal beliefs and professional experiences may influence our questions and interpretations. We were conscious, for example, of how influenced our approaches were by the prominence of decoloniality and reproductive justice in scholarship on abortion in the contexts we worked within. We considered the importance of identifying mobilisations as pro-abortion.

Our commitment to care for our interviewees is reflected in our anonymised and de-identified approach to describing our sample and presenting their words as quotes; this necessarily means that detail is lost (for example, never identifying the country the respondent works in). In our opinion this loss of detail is required to prioritise our respondents’ safety and work. Ethics review was completed at XXXXX and XXXX.

An external service transcribed the interview recordings; each transcript was checked and corrected by the authors. We analysed the transcripts facilitated by Dedoose.[[3]](#footnote-3) Our thematic analytic framework involved the organization of our qualitative data around cross-cutting themes, with an initial codebook based on our interview guide and the research team's initial re-readings of the transcripts. Three authors independently coded three transcripts using this initial codebook, after which team discussion identified additional sub-codes. All transcripts were double-coded; additional sub-codes were added following discussion throughout the coding. We recognize that these themes are not the only possible interpretation of the data, that our positionalities and identities have an impact on data and themes, and that themes need to be contextualized. Data is co-produced within and by interviewer-interviewee exchanges; the accounts provided by research participants were shaped by our identities and positionalities.

**Explaining international collaboration in African pro-abortion activism**

Central to decolonial critiques of neocolonialism is the argument that international fora and infrastructures involving Global North actors - including States, donor capital providers/ philanthrocapitalists, and international non-governmental organisations - are irreparably tied to reproducing hegemonic, colonialist systems of control. By infrastructures here we mean the systems and processes that underpin and shape interactions between different actors (Alam and Houston, 2020). The implication of decolonial critiques is that Global South actors pursuing de-/anti-colonial agendas should eschew engagement with such fora or indeed infrastructures that are similarly organised. Meaningful progress and transformation for those at the margins can only be achieved through building coalitions at the margins. This raises a question mark over why and how activists, including pro-abortion activists, who are keenly aware of colonialist legacies and power relations, strategically choose to navigate and engage with international infrastructures. Here, we analyse the explanations pro-abortion activists gave for engaging with international fora and infrastructures. Adopting an Afrofeminist approach, we highlight how their political decisions are shaped by vernacular cultures of the African post-colonial space. These include neocolonial legacies and also the need to challenge anti-abortion culturalism and the will to expand networks of pro-abortion allies and activists.

*Neocolonial legacies*

From a neocolonial position, the need to engage is due to the persistent control of Global South by the Global North through a combination of economic and symbolic capital. These tensions are highlighted by writing on NGOization (Choudry and Kapoor, 2013), development (Saharan and Schulpen, 2022) and philanthrocapitalism (Haydon et al, 2021) which highlight how Global North political infrastructures, including aid agencies and international networks, give activist groups legitimacy within national level policy fora. As we will outline later in the paper, MAMA members and allies also noted there is almost an expectation from national governments that civil society actors and activists will have support from an INGO or donor agency - “so most governments would say you cannot register, you're not an NGO, who are you?” (Interviewee 202). Global South governments are dependent financially on Global North aid and the support of Global North INGOs can be essential for recognition in the national level political sphere. As the respondent below highlights, MAMA activists and allies operate within a context which INGOs have limited space for civil society actors to operate independently:

most of the NGOs that are implementing projects[...] it's about funding, it's about, you know, donors having a realistic understanding of I give you money, you have to implement, you should not tell me what to do [...] I have the money so I have the power. So, because of that it has really weakened citizens' ability to voice their opinions and to also organise themselves in informal movements, and so when I mean community I mean these constituencies that NGOs are supposed to represent. (Interviewee 202)

The interpretation of international political infrastructures as including traces of colonialist politics and inequalities is highlighted across development studies research (Saharan and Schulpen, 2021; Lang, 2020; Nabacwa, 2010). Furthermore, the broader global SRH landscape that networks such as MAMA interact with is underpinned by logics of neoliberal development and health that reinforce the economic, political and embodied hierarchies between Global North and Global South actors and populations (Suh, 2021). The political contestations here are complicated and impacted by different aspects of the post-colonial context. The resistance to openly advocating for abortion is, as another interviewee noted, connected to dependence on INGOs for financial support:

the will to please donors by showing that there’s a harmonised, uniform movement of women’s rights in [name of country], of feminists more than women’s [...] and have numbers. And when you’re looking for numbers then you accept that some along the way are not as committed to the issues as they should (Interviewee 102)

Expressing a similar critique, another interviewee contended that political support from Global North organisations was detrimental to national organisations’ and activists’ efforts to generate support for marginalised campaigns, such as expanding abortion access. As this interviewee stated, criticising the interventions of some international NGOs following a conference:

we saw more of this from kind of [year] in the [name] conference, was the role of the public sector and the role of international NGOs that’ve essentially taken over and undermined local movement building and as funding has come in, people have positioned themselves and taken up space (Interviewee 111)

The problem, highlighted by Madhok, is that even these legitimate arguments are reductive as they collapse the experiences and particularities of large and diverse groups of actors inwards. The problematic Global North is positioned against the authentic Global South, a framework which, as Mohanty (2003) and Tamale (2013) argue, homogenizes and infantilizes Global South actors. Moreover, the representation of international politics as separated into North-South actor relations that are immutably underpinned by hegemonic colonialist forces ignores the heterogeneity of activisms in the Global South and their position within “contexts of resistance cut across by multiple political projects” (Liinason, 2021: 103). For pro-abortion activists, this includes an essentialist rejection of abortion as un-African (Ochiabuto and Ugwuja, 2023) and the manipulation of the language of colonialism and anti-imperialism by culturalist Afrocentric anti-choice movements (Chiweshe and Macleod, 2018; Boyce-Davis, 2014). A number of interviewees in our study argued that because pro-abortion activism was treated as “more radical work” (Interviewee 203) and as a “Western luxurious issue [...] an issue of the [Global] North” (Interviewee 102), their engagement with campaigns for addressing barriers to abortion resulted in the refusal of their organisation as a partner by national coalitions in the SRH space.

*Addressing anti-abortion Afro-culturalism*

The challenge facing these pro-abortion African activists was not only dependence on INGO aid but a post-colonial vernacular culture politics where supposedly progressive and culturally authentic African collective civil society organisations manipulate the language and spirit of anti-coloniality to strengthen anti-abortion positions (Chiweshe and Macleod, 2018). Anti-abortionist politics, alongside other conservative rejections of queer- and LGBTQ+- inclusive policies (Vorhölter, 2012), are also connected with post-colonial politics in Africa. As Boyce-Davis (2014) outlines in her review of feminism and pan-Africanism, within the post-colonial space, Afrocentric culturalist scholarship has moved in both decolonial feminist and anti-feminist directions. Discussing the work of Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) as typifying this phenomenon, Boyce-Davis contends that Afrocentric culturalist theory has mobilised vernacular cultures of traditional African matriarchal heritage (Amadiume, 2000: 302) which pre-existed and exist outside Western/Global North gender constructions, to return “women to a traditional place in an African cultural heritage” (Boyce-Davis, 2014: 84).

Within this political context, MAMA members and allies find themselves and their campaigns marginalised and isolated as too controversial (Tamale, 2005). This marginalisation extended, as in the two quotes from one interviewee below, to the national-level women’s sector and within their own organisations:

at national level is when quite a number of women’s organisations told the [name of network] that you have to stop speaking about abortion as a right or you have to stop speaking about abortion altogether, because you’re threatening the [gender] equality struggle in the country because whenever we open our mouth people who are opposed to us say that we are baby killers. (Interviewee 102)

I remember at the time when I was applying for the first abortion grant…and the staff would say they would never implement that programme again if it was the last (currency) (name of organisation) had. So, there was stigma even within the organisation, the people were like “why would we take it?”. Like, almost like blood money, you know. (Interviewee 102)

From this interview data, the politics of abortion in post-colonial context is made challenging by the neocolonial politics of international aid dependency and by the circulation of culturalist anti-abortion narratives within the post-colony. Against this backdrop, MAMA members and allies did not withdraw from collaborations which could help them achieve the goal of minimising barriers to abortion, even where those collaborations required utilising and participating in international fora and infrastructures supported by Global North organisations or working with organisations based in the Global North. As one interviewee commented, through building international alliances, they were able to learn new tactics from groups working towards abortion access albeit in different contexts:

I see those alliances key in, not just sharing information, but also sharing the tactics [...] we share like the different tactics with each other, depending on the, the exact political moment each member is in when they are fighting, for example, abortion rights (Interviewee 104)

Another interviewee asserted that collaboration with INGOs who provided financial support enabled activist groups to strengthen their practices:

we are working with [name of INGO] who gave safe abortion funds and they used it to come do advocacy training with us in [country] and helped us to identify stigma and misconception as one of the issues that is manipulating against access to abortion in [country]. So that was how we started, they helped us to write the proposal and they linked us to expats from [name of INGO] from there now we got [funder] fund and from there we started. (Interviewee 110)

In terms of why and how pro-abortion activists utilise international political infrastructures and fora, accounts from MAMA members and allies point to different interpretations. On the one hand, the utilisation could be explained through the logic of neocolonialism. Activists are dependent on international economic resources to continue working to support abortion access and pro-choice abortion advocacy. These economic resources support, as outlined by the interviewee quoted below, information hotlines and support for abortion seekers to access medication abortion:

because we work with different sexual reproductive health rights organisations [...] so whenever someone comes about an abortion we immediately share the [name of INGO] free toll number so we are like okay it doesn’t matter where you are in the country, [name of INGO] works with different pharmacies and they will advise you. Then we also work with [name of organisation] and they have a site called [website name] (Interviewee 201)

Given the emphasis on using INGO resources to support access to abortion care services, this quote could be read as illustrative of a neocolonial relationship where an INGO retains operational control of part of the post-colonial African state.

On the other hand, the utilisation of international networks, as exemplified in the quote above, can equally be read as a strategic mobilisation against the challenge of establishing and communicating how to access abortion care in contexts where abortion stigma is both common and connected with culturalist politics in the postcolony (Russo, 2020; Ochiabuto and Ugwuja, 2023). The challenge of abortion stigma and its operation as a barrier to accessing information on where and how to get an abortion is highlighted by Mohamed et al (2018) and Braam and Hessini (2004). It also limits political organising across feminist activists who are deterred from mobilising openly for controversial topics (Tamale, 2005). According to interviewees, international fora and infrastructures acted as facilitators for pro-choice abortion mobilising by African activists facing these post-colonial political tensions. As the interviewees below note, when working at a national level, even though they were working within the women’s rights sector, they felt isolated. By engaging with international infrastructures, both interviewees argued, they were able to draw support from and were energised by other groups with pro-abortion positions.

Because alone we would start to say “hey maybe we are crazy, maybe we need to stop this mindset”. But then we would go to this meeting, and we’d be like “wait a minute, there are more crazy people out here”, and we’d be like, like we felt we are in good company. (Interviewee 109)

Sometimes the discussion you're having in your own country when you are in international spaces is more easier for you [...] you find it's getting more energy when you are in international space and then that energy gives you more power to continue your work at national level. (Interviewee 103)

*Widening pro-abortion networks locally and transnationally*

Interviewees described how they used international fora to widen their network of allies and partners. This includes allies in their own countries whom they may have been previously unaware of, described as ‘finding their own colleague’ (Interviewee 103). Research participants outlined how international infrastructures offered a space to engage in conversations about abortion that were challenging in national-level fora. As Interviewee 103 stated at another point in their interview:

for a long time I've been working nationally but being engaged in international spaces provides more and clear guide and clear knowledge to how to inform the process at national level [...] four, five years ago, in-country it was very hard, you wouldn’t hear about abortion or if you want to hear about abortion people wouldn’t hear about safe abortion, it's hard to find someone very engaged when it comes to abortion. (Interviewee 103)

In addition to facilitating collective mobilisations with other pro-abortion organisations at a national level, interviewees described using international infrastructures to enable them to engage with governments. Research participants positioned international networks such as MAMA as a source of both political and economic capital, illustrated in comments below from two interviewees:

before we started partnering with [name of INGO] we used to work alone. But now we’ve discovered that in the field of access to safe abortion we cannot work alone [...] we need organisations that are well connected with the Ministry of Health, and that is why we brought in [name of INGO] (Interviewee 105)

these organisations now have given us the leverage. At a point we just wanted to withdraw from abortion work, then because of these organisations and because of this network that are there, they give you strength and leverage to continue in terms of finance, in terms of mobilisation of resources and everything (Interviewee 110)

These accounts can be interpreted as reflective of neocolonial dynamics. They resonate with contentions by Saharan and Schulpen (2022) that, within the African post-colonial context, a key technology of governance experienced by what they categorise as women’s rights organisations (WROs) is the demand by political elites that WROs have the support of INGOs. While research participants presented the political capital that international infrastructures and relationships provided, and the effect on the continuance of their advocacy, in positive terms, from a decolonial perspective it arguably speaks to deeply problematic asymmetries of political engagement. Embedded within these interviewees’ accounts is a political reality where, regardless of the need for expanding access to abortion as a matter of reproductive autonomy or public safety (Erdman, 2016), their campaigns only gained meaningful traction when they had the political and financial support of INGOs.

However, accounts from MAMA members and allies do not only or wholly align with this pattern. On the contrary, their reflections suggest that they were fully aware that they needed to exert caution when engaging with the constellation of policy actors (Berro Pizzarossa and Nandagiri, 2021) within the feminist activism and pro-choice abortion advocacy space. Interviewees’ accounts pointed to an active refusal to participate in collaborations which they viewed as disconnected from grassroots’ voices, local communities or the activist landscape at a national level. As one interviewee describes in the quote below:

I remember there was an [INGO] that came to do some work in [country] and I think they had Googled which organisations are in [country] [...] they went and partnered with these two organisations that are like, I could call them ghost organisations really, they barely do any work [...] and no one really knows them, they don’t really work, they work with the government and you know people that organisations, there are hundreds of organisations doing actual proper work and no one really is you know looking into their work and seeing where they are going. (Interviewee 201)

As other research participants explained, members of the MAMA network and its allies are very much focused on connecting with international actors, in the Global North and Global South, who are “not coming to change how we work but also adding value to the addition of the work we do on the ground” (Interviewee 203). As one interviewee described in the quote below, their use of international networks and fora involved actively reflecting on and strategically deciding to work with - or discontinue collaborations with - partners who could provide political and economic capital depending on whether the partnership would help them meaningfully advance their work:

It’s an annual exercise that we have where we have our own map, of who we consider allies, who we know, that those are our accomplices, those are people who have the same ambition, we might not have the same exact, you know, ways of work, but the politics are there [...] it really does change, depending on like who’s in leadership with those organisations or groups (Interviewee 104)

*South-North collaboration beyond neocolonialism*

These accounts indicate that the use of international networks and fora to gain leverage and financial resources should not only be interpreted as another example of neocolonialism’s effects on political mobilisations in Africa. Interviewees’ reflections point to a dynamic use of the political and economic capital that international networks and INGOs could and can offer to help organisations refine and reinforce their national-level engagements. However, crucially, these engagements with partners are strategic. Research participants were not using international networks and collaborations uncritically, to project an image of aligning to international agendas that would give them the political and symbolic capital to gain entry into national-level policy spaces that Saharan and Schulpen (2021) identify as emblematic of neocolonial legacies. They are circumspect in selecting which partners to work with. Research participants use international networks to progress their political goals and also gain strength and energy from collaborations with similarly pro-choice abortion international partners, or national partners they have been able to connect with in international fora, to refuse collaborations or sources of political and financial capital that are not aligned with or run counter to their pro-choice abortion goals.

The use of international networks and fora to be able to refuse engaging with or aligning to a particular partner does not neatly fit within an interpretation of international partnership as neocolonial. Certainly, there is a power asymmetry, which MAMA members and allies are aware of, embedded in and reproduced by NGOization whereby grassroots and community mobilisations have limited space to control or direct political agendas (Braam and Hessini, 2004; Saharan and Schulpen, 2021). The utilisation of international networks and organisations as a source of political and financial capital reinforces these limitations as it does not disrupt the relationship of dependency that allows external, international actors to dictate policy directions (Wallace, 2023). Yet, research participants’ accounts do not suggest that they are withdrawing from pursuing political projects, specifically pro-choice abortion activism, based on whether the INGO environment is supportive of their work. Rather, interview data suggests that they selectively work with partners in ways that enable activists to continue working on issues which are not recognised or are opposed by policy actors. This mobilisation through identifying and manipulating sources of political capital indicates that MAMA members and allies use international networks and fora to disrupt the political order they operate in.

These accounts highlight that a more nuanced understanding, beyond a neocolonialist critique, of African pro-choice abortion activists’ engagement with international networks, infrastructures and fora is needed. The lived perspective of MAMA members and allies of using international infrastructures to challenge the post-colonial political order that demands they maintain relations with particular actors returns us to Madhok’s critique of binary perspectives on international human rights politics as imposed or, ideally, rejected. Such interpretations foreclose recognition that political mobilisations authored by Global South actors (Madhok, 2017, 2020, 2022) can resemble, intersect with or mobilise through international infrastructures and networks authored or shaped by Global North actors. Activists and allies in our interviews spoke of the political benefits of collaborations with allies in the Global North and the limitations of collaborations with Global South organisations on pro-abortion issues.

**Conclusion**

The research project informing this paper set out to explore the perspectives of members and allies of a pro-abortion network and its allies based in Africa, who work with pro-abortion organisations in the Global North. Like Madhok, we were interested in considering the practices of rights-engaged actors (in our case pro-abortion/pro-choice abortion activists and allies) as shaped by vernacular cultures, knowledges, and histories in the Global South. Specifically, we wanted to look at how modes of political mobilising enunciated within a space above nation-state borders were informed by local histories and contexts and, because their actions emerged from this position, their work may bring together actors with both a global and a local orientation in was that are politically generative rather than colonialist. Our contention was inspired by Afrofeminist and post/decolonial critiques of the construction of Global South actors as inherently curtailed by and always lacking agency within international infrastructures. Perspectives on international engagement as wholly problematic fail to appreciate that Global South actors can navigate international relations towards transgressive and transformative ends (Ong, 1999; Tamale, 2013).

Reading international political infrastructures as neither globally authoritarian nor locally resisted is appropriate for the African feminist space, where working above and across nation-state borders towards shared political goals has an established history. This history is articulated through feminist Pan-Africanism and international solidarities (Dosekun, 2021; Boyce Davies, 2014; Tamale, 2020). Engagement with international networks, infrastructures and fora in Africa is actively produced through collaborative working across borders to connect local specificities with shared trans-locational histories (Boyce Davis, 2014).

Connecting vernacular rights cultures with accounts of pro-abortion activism in the African space underscores the limitations of binary interpretations of how to disrupt coloniality generally as well as in the specific context of pro-abortion politics. The former critique is consistent with decolonial scholarship which argues that decolonization does not mean rejecting the Global North but shifting the “locus of enunciation” (Byrne, 2020: 41) from Global North histories to Global South positionalities. Madhok’s (with Dunford, 2015; 2022) arguments on the problems of ‘origins’ speak directly to this. Yet despite the calls to fundamentally shift the locus of enunciation, the nomenclature of transnational rights politics remains rooted in Global North histories. This is reflected in the framing of Global South actors as either subject or resistant to political discourses which act as new modes of empire (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

These contentions resonate with the accounts of MAMA activists and allies on their experiences of and engagement with international infrastructures, networks and fora. Participants are aware of the problems within the transnational political space. They draw attention to the demands of donor capital and delineations insisted on by international non-governmental organisations (e.g. to focus on specific activities or pursue particular political engagements with other Global South actors). Their work partly involves resisting or vernacularizing Global North agendas. However, this is not the only way they discuss their work or the challenges they face. Nor do they express feelings of compulsion with regard to well-financed, Global North-authored political projects they disagree with.

The accounts from research participants indicate that the activism of actors such as MAMA involves constituting, for strategic reasons, networks which meaningfully enable them to move towards their political objectives. The constitutive process reflects the historical, political, legal and socio-economic contexts they emerge from and work within. MAMA activists and allies are located in contexts where national-level organisations and the women’s development sector may not be supportive of abortion access but where Global North pro-abortion organisations offer this support. Conceptually, this presents a potential reading of international engagement closer to vernacular rights cultures. A political assemblage of actors based in the Global South and Global North come together as pro-abortion activists working towards addressing barriers to abortion and expanding access. Significantly, their work is directed at addressing challenges located in the culturalist politics of the post-colonial African context, which conflate anti-abortion positions with authenticity, as well as problems related to neocolonial control by anti-abortion INGOs.

 The work of producing new forms of international engagement, based around pro-choice abortion positions, in the African postcolony is not straightforward. The accounts of research participants foreground points of tension. These include the challenges that arise when the work of activists and allies moves away from the established political order or as they trouble the vernacular narratives of a homogeneous, authentic Afro-feminist political sensibility (Tamale, 2020). In their attempts to pursue more explicitly pro-abortion engagements - and to refuse collaborations with actors who did not meet their standards for allyship - some interviewees reported finding their avenues to impacting national-level political progress limited. These accounts are important as they locate the point of tension in the political ideologies circulating within the Global South rather than the engagements imposed by Global North actors. This distinction resonates with Roy’s (2023) arguments regarding the need for critical attentiveness to the problematics of South-South political encounters, as well as North-South political encounters.

International infrastructures, networks and fora are presented in much critical scholarship as mechanisms for and representations of neocolonialist control of the Global South by the Global North. Certainly, the international is marked by clear inequalities in subject-agency and discursive position. At the same time, feminist interventions challenge the interpretation of international engagements as typified by on-going relations of colonialist domination of the Global South by the Global North. These interventions have contended that such interpretations conceptually reinforce the hegemonic status of Global North as the initiator (Madhok, 2017). They also risk collapsing Global South actors together, ignoring their diversity (Tamale, 2020) and preclude discursive analysis of Global South actors’ engagements with other Global South partners (Lewis, 2008). As an alternative, Madhok (2017) proposes vernacular rights cultures, a framework that interrogates the discursive orderings enunciated from the Global South as an assemblage connected to but neither a replication nor a rearticulation nor a refutation of an established Global North discourse.

This paper sought to operationalise this argument and illustrate its usefulness for enabling an interpretation of African pro-abortion activists’ transnational engagements as manifestations of strategic agency rather than subservience or resistance to the Global North. It draws attention to how actors in the Global South working in this political space could intentionally and strategically develop allyship relations with Global North actors. While engagements between actors in the Global South and Global North remain problematic, the paper demonstrated the importance of foregrounding the political objectives of Global South actors in how these engagements are interpreted. This is important in the context of pro-abortion politics, where South-South collaborations may undermine efforts to amplify and address abortion access as a political goal. A view of the transnational as formed by strategic decision-making from the Global South is also, the paper contended, appropriate for feminist organising in the African space which in its historic and contemporary forms involves collaborations across nation-state borders.

Overall, the paper and underpinning research, points to the importance of approaching the work of Global South actors generally, and feminist organisers and their allies in the Global South specifically, as generating forms of political collaboration, and moving beyond describing the challenges they face. This shift involves discursive analysis of the relationships between and positions of actors in the Global South relative to each other (rather than solely relative to the Global North). It repositions Global North actors and political agendas in the mobilisations of Global South actors. The Global North moves from becoming either the author or saviour of Global South actors’ problematics to becoming a resource which Global South political projects may (not) use and incorporate into their work. In making these arguments, the paper shows the possibility for pro-abortion research to amplify the international engagements of Global South actors as resulting from an intentional political strategy rather than only a position of political subservience.

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**Appendix 1: Sample characteristics**



\* Defined using Center for Reproductive Rights categories (accessed 21/08/2024): Prohibited altogether; To save a person’s life; To preserve health; Broad social or economic grounds; On request (Gestational limits)

1. ‘Post-colonial’ refers to the period after colonized countries gained administrative independence; ‘postcolonialism’ and ‘postcolonial’ refer to theoretical approaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Global South’ is a geopolitical designation that refers to the transnational, often deterritorialized “spaces and peoples that have been negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization” (Mahler, 2017: np). While Madhok (2024) challenges the use of geopolitical and epistemic binaries, like Global South/Global North, we recognise, following Byrne and Imma (2019) that there are systems of power and relations that have developed in the late 20th and 21st century between two broad categories of actors - those economically advantaged by contemporary globalized capitalism and those marginalised and restricted by it. Those advantaged build on imperialist positionalities historically situated and emerging from Western/Eurocentric places and elites ‘north’ of the equator; a significant portion of those disadvantaged live in places ‘south’ of the equator. Although a ‘minority’/’rest of the world’ designation, instead of Global North/Global South, would have avoided a territorialized imaginary, we have opted to use the Global South/Global North label as it has meaning for those working in and with actors and allies, in the African space, who are the focus of this paper. We are also mindful to use similar terminology to the Afrofeminist theorists who are central to this paper, all of whom regularly work with the Global South/Global North labels. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dedoose Version 9.0.17, a cloud application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2021). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)