



ACTIVISTS AND FEMINISTS IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND SENEGAL: ACTIONS, STAKES, DYNAMICS



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Executive Summary

All across the world, women are fighting to obtain the same rights as men. Some of these women consider themselves as activists, others feminists, while others prefer not to label their position. Although the overall aim of these movements is to achieve gender equality worldwide, within it are many regional specificities that must be taken into account. In order to understand the activities of feminist movements working towards the rights of women in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal, five master's students at Sciences Po undertook a collaborative research project. Their report is based on field research in the form of qualitative interviews conducted with representatives from the two West African countries.

The question of feminism

During the field study, activists in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal were interviewed on their beliefs and their **perception of feminism**: do they consider themselves feminists? How do they define their activities? The

The majority of the women interviewed in both countries see themselves as feminists.

qualitative data analysis reveals that the majority of the women interviewed in both countries consider themselves as feminists: their aim is to establish gender equality and to have the same rights recognised and upheld for women as for men. Nevertheless, some activists explained that they do not identify themselves as “feminists”, due to the difficulties this could cause for them within their community. For them, it can be easier to carry out activities under the banner of “gender equality” rather than that of “feminism”. When asked about the existence of an African feminism, some Senegalese activists explained that they reject feminism in its Western conception, and call for an adaptation of its principles to the realities of Africa. In Côte d'Ivoire, meanwhile, activists focused more on intergenerational differences in attitudes, particularly with regards to the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community within their actions. The country's younger feminists seemed more open to this. In both countries, a

minority of interviewees was against the idea of overturning the established patriarchal system, in which men hold the dominant position compared to women. Whilst these groups are active in campaigning for women's rights, they do not question the legitimacy of men's social status as head of the family, for example. Religious traditions (both Christianity and Islam) can play an important role in this view.

What are the priority issues?

Interviewees in Côte d'Ivoire shared the view that **female empowerment**, particularly by improving access to education for women and girls, is the priority issue for achieving gender equality. This is followed by **gender-based violence** (GBV) which, according to the activists, particularly affects girls within the education system. Challenges relating to the strengthening of legal protection and discrepancies between statutory and customary law also remain significant obstacles.

For Senegalese activists, the need to **invest in female health and education** is a priority issue. **Ending violence against women** also features among the priorities for improving the conditions of women in Senegal.

Priority Issues	
Côte d'Ivoire	Senegal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Female empowerment ▶ Education of women and girls ▶ Gender-based violence ▶ Legal issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Access to healthcare and sexual and reproductive health ▶ Education of women and girls ▶ Violence against women and girls

Since this field study was carried out exclusively in the two countries' capitals, the interviewees specified that there are many regional variations in the conditions and challenges that women face. Abidjan, the Ivorian economic capital, represents a social "enclave" of sorts, with conditions very different to those of the rest of Côte d'Ivoire. Similarly, in Senegal a broad gap is generally acknowledged between the situation in the capital, Dakar, and the rest of the country: the Senegalese interviewees noted a

significant difference between urban and rural areas, particularly with regards to health and access to healthcare. Female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriages occur more frequently in rural than urban areas. The activists met in Côte d'Ivoire pointed primarily to the differences between the predominantly Muslim north of the country and its predominantly Christian south. This religious demography is seen as a contributing factor to several gender-related differences around the country, notably in terms of the division of social roles or the place of women in decision-making and in the public sphere more generally. However, it is important not to confuse religion with broader traditions and customs whose existence predates the establishment of Christianity and Islam in Côte d'Ivoire.

Female empowerment – what is the situation in the professional sphere?

Female empowerment is a key element in the achievement of gender equality.

Both Ivorian and Senegalese activists regard female empowerment and financial independence as a key element to achieve gender equality. Interviewees in Senegal highlighted the progress made with the adoption of the country's Gender Parity Law¹, but noted that the situation remains difficult for women at a professional level. Compared to the rest of West Africa, Senegal is the country with the most equal access to primary and secondary education for boys and girls². Despite this, the activists mentioned that access to scientific professions remains limited for women holding a university degree. Likewise, in Côte d'Ivoire, where access to secondary education remains a major challenge for girls, the interviewees noticed resistance to the inclusion of women in professions perceived to be “masculine”. In both countries, sexual harassment in the workplace poses an obstacle to gender equality and puts female employees at risk. Senegalese activists added that the majority of women who experience sexual harassment are unlikely to report it for fear of ostracization or ridicule. In addition, wage gaps existing in all fields and positions further restrict the achievement of gender equality at a professional level in both countries. Maternity related discrimination is a problem for women in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, where recruiters are often reluctant to employ women on the basis of pregnancy or perceived likelihood of pregnancy.

¹ République du Sénégal. 'Journal Officiel de La République Du Sénégal', 2010.

² UNICEF. 'Adolescent Girls in West and Central Africa Data Brief'. UNICEF, 2019.

What action are they taking to improve conditions for women?

The activists met in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal campaign both individually and collectively to improve the conditions and rights of women in their countries. The majority of their initiatives focus on the issues identified as a priority within each country: education, training and female empowerment, access to healthcare (particularly sexual and reproductive), GBV, women's rights, including property rights. Furthermore, the **methods of activism** used by both Ivorian and Senegalese interviewees are principally the same, though adapted to the specific context of each country. The following table provides an overview of the different types of collective action carried out by activists in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.

Collective action in Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal

- ▶ Most activities are organised by NGOs and non-profit organisations, in the form of targeted group projects.
- ▶ A participatory and inclusive approach is necessary to ensure that all activities on the ground have a sustainable impact on beneficiaries and their communities.
- ▶ Art is used as a way of reaching a wider and more diverse audience.

What types of projects are organised?¹

Awareness-raising projects

- ▶ Focus groups, gender or health "clubs" in schools, educational campaigns, caravans that travel around the country providing information to people in remote regions.
- ▶ Project type most emphasized by the Ivorian interviewees.
- ▶ Classified as a bottom-up approach aimed at changing society from the local level upwards.

Advocacy projects

- ▶ Often used within the legal system as a bottom-up means of reaching authorities, decision-makers and political actors.
- ▶ Implementation of laws remains a significant challenge. To this end, rights-based networks often work on popularization and awareness-raising around laws, as well as translating legal texts into local languages to make them more accessible.

¹ All the types of projects described are implemented in Côte d'Ivoire and in Senegal.

Field missions and survey research

- ▶ Aim at informing communities about their rights and to gain an understanding of local contexts (particularly in rural areas).
- ▶ Distribution of products and facilities, e.g. feminine and menstrual hygiene products.

Construction and infrastructure building projects

- ▶ Building of centres for survivors of GBV.
- ▶ Ivorian interviewees noted that the demand for these kinds of refuges is higher than the number of places available.

The use of public spaces

- ▶ The activists/feminists use art as a way of spreading their messages: singing, theatre, exhibitions, artistic performances etc.
- ▶ Radio, journalism and the internet – tools which allow projects to reach a broad and diverse audience.
- ▶ The internet plays an increasingly important role. However, it is important to ensure that communities without internet access are not excluded from activities. It is therefore essential to continue using traditional media, such as radio channels in local languages.

Relationship between activists and religious and political institutions

Given the different types of collective action, it is important to understand the **relationship between activists and institutions** of influence within the feminist combat. Interviewees in Senegal highlighted the importance of Islam, the country's predominant religion, which is a key element of daily life and plays a particular role in defining the place of women in society. However, the country contains many different Muslim groups, who do not always share the same views on gender equality related

It is important to cooperating with religious authorities.

issues, such as medical abortion. Cooperating with **religious authorities** is therefore essential, as these institutions are not only respected and

adhered to by the general public but also by the Senegalese state. Activists from Côte d'Ivoire, home to large Muslim and Christian communities, also expressed the importance of working alongside religious leaders, who wield considerable power among the community. In order to establish a good working relationship, Ivorian activists rely on discussion, collaboration and detailed explanation of their projects. They especially

collaborate with religious authorities on the issues of FGM and child or forced marriages.

As for **political authorities**, some of the Ivorian interviewees have established working relationships with politicians, while others have not (often by choice, in order to maintain their independence). Some activists believe that, while the Ivorian state may have good intentions, there is a lack of real enforcement of equality laws within the country. The majority of the feminists interviewed believe that societal reform should start at a micro-level, i.e. at the level of families and communities, rather than at state level. In Senegal, interviewees reported a strong collaboration with the country's Ministry of Women, Family and Gender and its health services. They also stated that more resources need to be allocated to projects promoting the rights of young women. Moreover, according to the activists in both countries the implementation of laws, particularly those concerning FGM, continues to be problematic.

Finally, some of the women interviewed regard politics as a means of achieving change and therefore wish to enter the political system. Others, meanwhile, see politics more as a restriction to their freedom of expression and their activism.

Taking action online: blogs, social networks and new forms of journalism

For several reasons, including the preservation of their freedom of expression, many of the feminists/activists prefer to **pursue their activities as independent individuals**. For these women, the internet plays a crucial role (in both Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal). **Social networks** have become a space for appreciation and promotion of campaigns led by activists. In

The internet and social media play a crucial role.

Côte d'Ivoire, several activists discussed the power of the internet, where social media posts and videos have the potential to reach thousands of people, without the intervention of institutions or third-party organisations. Note that in Senegal, the internet is seen more as a marketing tool for activists to promote their work to the general public, national authorities and international sponsors. **New forms of journalism**, and above all blogs, allow activists to engage on an individual basis with the issues most important to them. These new forms of journalism also facilitate public speaking, which can be an obstacle for many women in both countries. Patriarchal structures in the two countries restrict women's

“permission” to speak in public, making them reluctant or even afraid of doing so. Despite this, some activists from both countries have turned to writing books as a way of expressing their thoughts and opinions. As such, writing is essential for research and publications on the issue of feminism, gender equality and/or women’s rights.

Lastly, social networks make it easier for activists/feminists to connect with one another, even across national borders. This facilitates collaboration and gives even greater visibility to their activities. **In-person networks** have also been created to do so and are often attached to a profession: Côte d’Ivoire has a network for journalists, bloggers and female lawyers, for example. Interviewees agreed that such networks are beginning to emerge across West Africa.

What are the needs of young activists and feminists?

In Côte d’Ivoire, activists expressed **the need for a “House of Feminism”**, a common place where activists/feminists can meet, share ideas and gain access to materials necessary for their activities. In their view, this would facilitate coordination between existing networks and help to overcome the financial difficulties of organising workshops and seminars by limiting venue rental costs, for example.

More generally, in both countries, participants mentioned that **financial and technical support** is indispensable to the successful implementation of projects. Such support is often provided by donors or international NGOs. For the Senegalese activists, local support can also provide greater credibility to activities, a view which contrasted with testimonies from some Ivorian interviewees. By comparison, the Ivorian activists noted that a large percentage of their society tends to be more trusting of international statistics. As a consequence, attempts to cooperate with the State may diminish the credibility of an organisation as it may sacrifice its independence. In order to avoid this kind of dependency, some Ivorian and Senegalese activists prefer to self-finance their projects. In addition, interviewees explained that international support is often provided on the condition that projects correspond to the strategic aims of the donor. Consequently, in certain cases the local context of projects and their beneficiaries can be overlooked when designing and evaluating a project.

Interviewees in both countries stressed the importance of **long-term partnerships** allowing completed projects to be monitored and evaluated. Both of these are crucial to maximise the impact of projects and to ensure their sustainability. In addition to such techno-financial and logistical support, activists also highlighted the **need for capacity building through the recruitment of qualified staff members and the organisation of workshops**. Strengthening the links between West African countries was mentioned several times as a way of sharing skills and expertise. Interviewees also shared the view that applying a **participatory approach** from “start to finish” (including a follow-up phase at the end of a project) would help to increase the impact of their projects and activities. In both countries, activists agreed that **more survey-based research and field missions** are necessary in order to reach remote communities. According to the Ivorian feminists, young girls, especially in rural areas, are in particular need of support. Interviewees also emphasised an urgent need to support survivors of GBV, in both rural and urban areas. Increased support for young girls is seen as a necessity in Senegal, including girls with a disability. Overall, Senegalese activists identified a greater need for women in rural areas in terms of access to health services, including follow-up care. In cities, more support is required to encourage female entrepreneurship. Finally, interviewees stated that, rather than presenting women as victims, emphasis should be placed on their successes and competencies.

It is important to form long-term partnerships.

Recommendations

1 Support women and girls in rural areas or outside the principal urban centres, particularly with regards to access to healthcare and education.

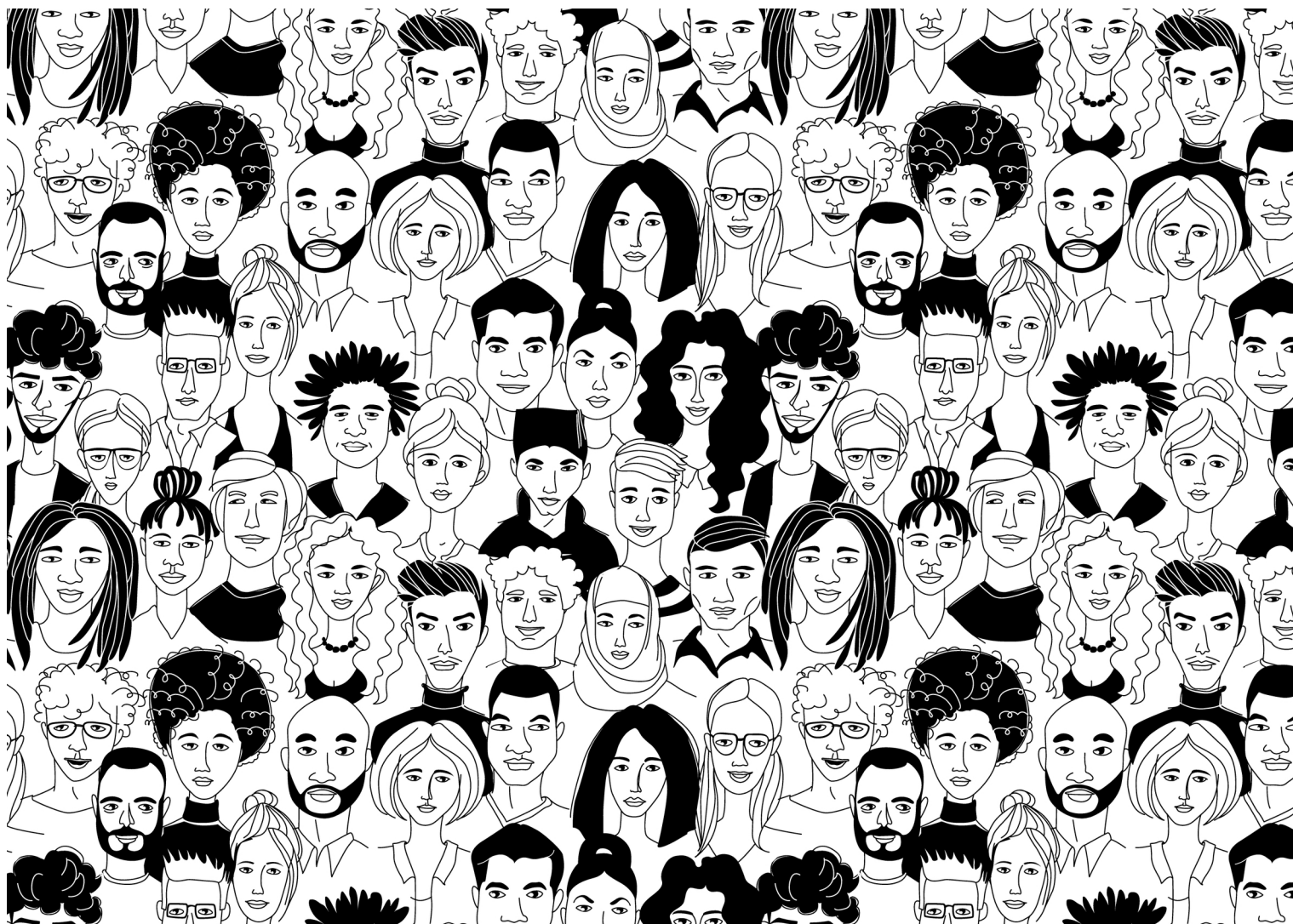
- ▶ Conduct more survey studies and field missions in order to deepen the understanding of the needs of rural (female) communities.
- ▶ Include women and girls from rural areas in the planning of projects and strategies aimed to improve access to healthcare and education.
- ▶ In order to ensure that projects have a lasting impact, collaborate with village and religious leaders and their communities. If the conditions of women are to improve, all stakeholders must adopt egalitarian rather than patriarchal behaviour and attitudes.

2 Fight to prevent and raise awareness around gender-based violence.

- ▶ Strengthen awareness-raising campaigns and introduce more gender units in schools, universities, public and legal institutions.
- ▶ Boost the development of support services for GBV survivors, including comprehensive legal, medical, psychological and socioeconomic support.
- ▶ Put the well-being of GBV survivors and their access to justice at the heart of all activities.

3 Promote gender equality in schools and create environments conducive to girls' academic success.

- ▶ Invest in the new generation by raising and educating young people according to gender equal (and not patriarchal) norms.
- ▶ Encourage schools to introduce gender units.
- ▶ End GBV in schools and universities (e.g.: “sexually transmitted grades”, sexual harassment of young girls by their teachers) and hold perpetrators to account.
- ▶ Promote girls' leadership by creating opportunities in which they can apply leadership qualities such as public speaking or political leadership.



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