Protectives Knowledges: Fields, Experiences and Practices in the Fight Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Africa

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At a time when social violence, especially sexual and gender-based violence, is increasing across Africa, the need to reflect on the knowledge that shapes and drives its dynamics becomes more urgent. This (re)raises the issue of protective knowledge as a central concern of current events, emphasizing the importance of addressing it to guide, enrich, and support the many initiatives involved in the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) and its societal impacts. We define protective knowledge as the understanding, techniques, customs, procedures, innovations, and practices derived from the socially rooted and effective experiences, initiatives, research, and experimentation of those actively engaged in combating GBV daily. Often resulting from interactions between local actors and social workers, this knowledge provides the skills, capabilities (Sen, 1999), and aptitudes that enable communities and individuals to prevent violence, deliver restorative and regenerative care when violence occurs, and build resilience. It serves as a middle ground between traditional methods and imported models of responding to GBV.

Created through hybridization or innovation, they aim to respond more practically and contextually to local issues while utilizing potentially travelling conceptual tools and practices. The complexity and ongoing change of the logics and practices involved in social violence are key factors in deepening this knowledge. They pay close attention to the codes and various modes of justification and social legitimization for these practices, thereby becoming more discerning in how they interpret the material and immaterial methods of addressing them.

Despite the theoretical and practical strengths of strategies to fight against GBV, recognition and appreciation of them remain hindered by often polarized debates in epistemology and politics. Some praise Western knowledge with nostalgic passion, criticizing the failure of exogenous knowledge as unsuitable for local realities. Conversely, others continue

to believe in the universality of the epistemic frameworks behind development efforts. Protective knowledge emerges as a third way to combat violence—hybrid, innovative, and pragmatic—that warrants serious examination to explore its heuristic possibilities and operative power, especially regarding community appropriation and scaling up within local or national policies aimed at addressing social violence, mainly sexual and gender-based violence.

This special issue of *Global Africa* sets out to explore these protective knowledges, not as a simple alternative to dominant models, but rather as a decolonial praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) in that they value and institutionalize experiences of care and deconstruct structures of violence, some of which have colonial traces. The aim is then to understand how this protective knowledge is constructed, disseminated and transformed in the day-to-day interactions between local communities and the actors (external or otherwise) who intervene in their contexts. In short, it is a question of taking seriously the epistemic and pragmatic virtues of local dynamics in the fight against social violence in Africa (GBV in particular), without falling into the trap of cultural romanticism or naive scientism incapable of thinking in context and considering its social attachments. Taking protective knowledge seriously is, of course, a critical endeavor, because even if this knowledge is more adaptable to addressing local challenges we must not lose sight of the fact that it remains a social construct. In this respect, it is not immune to the conflicts of local social arenas, and are not, so to speak, "immune" by default to the risks of reproducing and maintaining certain problematic power dynamics between local actors themselves, and between local actors themselves and external actors.

Gender-based violence as the expression of a patriarchal epistemic field

Gender-based violence is a complex, multi-faceted social phenomenon, expressing the activation of social power relations that manifest themselves and are experienced in all societies. In this respect, they can be considered as quasi-anthropological invariants of social life. Although generally made up of distinguishable empirical and/or symbolic facts, GBV are nonetheless historicized social practices (Shove & Pantzar, 2012), *i.e.* social practices sedimented in imaginaries, beliefs, historical "truths", etc. That is why it is important to see them as perspectives on the world (Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2019) and as ramps for action on it.

In patriarchal social configurations, knowledge is fundamentally derived from an epistemic (and therefore political and economic) field (Bourdieu, 2022) that obeys particular modalities of attachment to the world. Generally consisting of thinking, ways of experiencing, ways of acting, etc., these so-called modalities carry and legitimize the logics and dynamics of production and reproduction of masculine domination. Such a field represents a system of knowledge in which the values, norms, rules, ideas, practices, etc., that produce social inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, are generated and then normalized - even naturalized. The patriarchal epistemic field thus forms a kind of matrix of subordination and submission of women to men, in all their diversity. It thus refers to those material and immaterial social spaces where knowledge is produced, validated, protected, transmitted and shared according to sexually asymmetrical power structures dedicated to the service of male privilege (McIntosh, 2019; O'Brien, 2009).

As far as GBV are concerned, this notion of a patriarchal epistemic field implies that the social practices that bear them out are embedded in systems of knowledge and belief that are dedicated to maintaining and reproducing patriarchy's action patterns - gender hierarchy - domination - oppression - violence - gender inequality continuum. It must be said that this field incorporates the dynamics of resistance and struggle for the emancipation of women and girls that emerge and mobilize in social spaces, but generally phagocytises them as inputs to its own consolidation. This hinders the success of these dynamics, which end up abandoning their transformational ambitions. The continuum mentioned above is reflected in deeply entrenched ideas about the world and social practices, with often disastrous consequences for women and girls, as shown year after year by quantitative and qualitative updates on the state of progress of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 5, set by the international community and dedicated to achieving gender equality[1].

1 https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/fr/gender-equality/

To fully grasp the above is to agree on the need to thoroughly rethink knowledge (as cognitive matrices and as sets of acquired knowledge), as well as the values, norms and institutions that support them and from which they derive their power, which contribute to the reproduction of GBV. The main challenge here is to bring about an epistemic transformation conducive to the establishment of a less violent society in the short and medium term, but aimed, in the long term, at the outright dismantling of the toxic logics of patriarchal violence.

Rethinking the "usual" typologies of knowledge

Considering, as written above, that social practices (GBVs in particular here) are historicized by knowledge, it seems obvious that the first challenge to be tackled by the ambition of the epistemic transformation in question is that of the presuppositions and evidences of the classical typology of knowledge. Indeed, no typology is neutral in terms of its effects on societies and on the interactions of knowledge and action that take place within them. Typologies always reflect and convey positions, implicit hierarchies, diverse power relationships and so on. That's why it's important to distance ourselves from them and subject them to a critical problematization that tests the established categories. In this endeavor, it should be noted that, we should point out that it is difficult to find a precise, stabilized and shared typology of knowledge in the scientific literature of the social sciences. However, we believe that, for the sake of clarity, we should organize what emerges from the plethora of writings on the subject into two approaches to the typologization of knowledge: a theoretical approach with a universalist tendency, and an empirical approach with a relativist tendency. That's why it's important to distance ourselves from them and subject them to a critical questioning that tests the established categories. As a precautionary measure, we should point out that it is difficult to find a precise, stabilized and shared typology of knowledge in the scientific literature of the social sciences. However, we believe that, for the sake of clarity, it is appropriate to organize what emerges from the plethora of writings on the subject into two approaches to the typologization of knowledge: a theoretical approach with a universalist tendency, and an empirical approach with a relativist tendency.

Within the framework of the universalist theoretical approach, we can consider that knowledge is typologized according to an ideal typical mode. We propose to divide them into three main groups. First, theoretical knowledge, which is constituted by the accumulation, codification, and relative fixation of knowledge and/or skills acquired through training and/or experience in a particular field or fields of interest. This knowledge is generally fixed (more or less relatively) and codified with a view to its reproducibility and transmission, notably through formal or informal teaching. Second procedural knowledge, *i.e.* the knowledge acquired through experience in applying prescriptions for performing defined tasks (*i.e.* learning and practice). These are repertoires of skills acquired through teaching and/or training: they enable the application of techniques, methods, etc., within the framework of procedures designed to achieve pragmatic results. Like procedural knowledge, procedural knowledge is generally codified (often rigidly), enabling it to be transmitted. Finally, social know-how, which is mainly represented by what is commonly referred to as "savoir-être". It encompasses the various expressions of attitudes socially expected of social subjects in their contexts of interaction. Social know-how is complex, and is embodied in codes, norms, values, representations, beliefs, myths and so on. Situational and relational, they are codified but remain adaptable (and therefore subject to influence and transformation), and are transmitted through dynamic enculturation patterns.

The empirical, relativist approach, for its part, can be illustrated through an analysis of the knowledge that emerges in the world of development actors, in sub-Saharan Africa in particular. In the field of development, endogenous knowledge, perceived as traditional and local, is often contrasted with exogenous knowledge, associated with models imported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international institutions. Although outdated, the dualistic view, deeply rooted in evolutionary ideologies of progress, is still operative when we consider its concrete influences on local practices of "developers", in "developing" contexts. Indeed, it determines and legitimizes either the adaptation of exogenous knowledge to local realities, or the integration of endogenous knowledge into

development activities. This is revealed, for example, by the debates and controversies surrounding *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (*TEK*)[2] and their supposed effects on a kind of ritual protection of the ecosystem contexts that surround them (Barrière & Barrière, 2007).

While convenient, both approaches to typologization have significant shortcomings. The first approach is weakened by its idealistic character, which proceeds by stylization on the one hand and, on the other, by decoupling knowledge from the social practices that bear it and from which it derives its fruitfulness The epistemological bias here is blatant: knowledge is disembodied, sometimes positivized, even though it is fundamentally within and outside the social interactions and cognitive processes it is supposed to account for. The rigid classification of the second approach is polarizing. Not to mention the fact that this typology is generally driven either by militant radicalism or by silo thinking.

On the one hand, there is a militant approach that celebrates endogenous knowledge as a path to redemption for indigenous peoples oppressed by the developmentalist machine. According to this perspective, local knowledge, long marginalized by Western models, must be rehabilitated to enable Africa, in particular, to regain its cultural and political autonomy. In the current context of the rise in popularity of neo-sovereignism, driven in particular by networks and social movements, some authors enthusiastically celebrate endogenous African knowledge, presenting it as a supposedly effective remedy effective remedy, but one that has been undermined by the colonial enterprise and the indolence of African public policies. This approach, though appealing, is hampered by the pitfalls of cultural romanticism, idealizing traditional practices without questioning their problematic aspects.

On the other hand, the more skeptical voices denounce the failures of exogenous knowledge, deemed unsuited to local realities (Olivier de Sardan, 2021). This perspective criticizes the models imported by NGOs, which are said to be imposed on the "African terrain" without understanding local contexts. Exogenous knowledge, supposedly carried by foreign actors, would fail to take root in communities, failing to take into account local resistance and specific social dynamics. Unfortunately, this vision overlooks the "glocal" circularity of so-called community dynamics. It also clearly underestimates the capacity of local players to appropriate and transform knowledge that comes to them from actors outside their communities.

In any cases, the second approach (the empirical one), even if it contextualizes social interactions around knowledge more clearly, essentializes endogenous knowledge, reducing it to authentic social realities that are not or slightly subject to variation, while exogenous knowledge is portrayed as foreign impositions, disconnected from local social histories and experiences. It can be noticed here a persistent tendency to homogenize disparate, articulated elements. This approach implies a typology that ignores the hybridization and re-appropriation that constantly occur in the fields where knowledge circulates, influences each other, colors each other, and cross-fertilizes. It tends to lock debates into oppositions, where endogenous knowledge is either celebrated as luminous paths to social intelligence and/or magical levers for the operationalization of development initiatives, or dismissed as obstacles to progress.

Protective knowledge: a decolonial category of robust knowledge for action against GBV

Suppose we accept that social practices of violence historicize knowledge about GBV in social contexts. In that case, we cannot be satisfied with the heuristic and practical impotence of the typologization of knowledge described. Indeed, the various typological categories simply prevent us from grasping in depth the complexity of the dynamics at work in the creation of plural forms of knowledge about GBV in general, and in particular the knowledge that enables us to take effective action against such violence and its dramatic effects on the lives of the people concerned. This is why an innovative, situated and committed approach to knowledge is needed to percolate through the social care

2 For information about this https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tek/description.htm#:~:text=Traditional%20Ecological%20Knowledge%20(TEK)%20is,environment%2C%20handed%20down%20through%20generations%2C

practices with which societies surround GBV survivors, the knowledge that supports them and from which they are fertile. This approach invites us to go beyond reductive dichotomies (even those that are intended to be benevolent) to explore the complex dynamics underlying the production and dissemination of knowledge about social care practices in Africa: protective knowledge.

By taking seriously the interactions between GBV stakeholders (all those involved) and plural local communities, as its social frameworks of meaning, the protective knowledge approach offers possibilities for understanding and developing contextually relevant material and symbolic tools for combating GBV and transforming the sociosymbolic conditions that produce it. It pave the way to a decompartmentalized, inclusive and decolonial epistemology (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), which recognizes the value of local knowledge without essentializing it, and which values hybridization and reappropriation as sources of innovation and fertile change.

Protective knowledge is part of a plural, dynamic and socially operative system that not only gives meaning to social practices of violence, but also, and above all, instills itself in the diverse practices that enable their comprehensive management within the communities where GBV emerges. As articulated sets of knowledge and practices that concretely actualize the intersectional stakes (Crenshaw 2023) of social practices of violence, they constitute emergent properties of interactions between actors working in the field of social violence management, including populations, community workers/relays, religious leaders, customary authorities, healthcare personnel, NGOs, researchers, academics, activists, actors in the justice system, actors in grassroots community organizations (CBOs), etc. They "constitute sources and resources of innovation and action that can significantly contribute to strengthening the prevention of violence, the care of victims/survivors and their support towards recovery and resilience". They constitute sources and resources of innovation and action that can significantly contribute to strengthening the prevention of violence, the care of victims/survivors and their support towards recovery and resilience.

From this point of view, protective knowledge can only be truly understood by induction, based on well-established empirical lessons. It is neither endogenous nor exogenous, but is the product of a continuous process of hybridization and reappropriation of the practices and knowledge of local and non-local stakeholders involved in the management of GBV. It is this main characteristic that underpins their robustness, pragmatism, dynamism and adaptability, making them better able to respond to the specific care needs of communities by exploiting "what is their own" in articulation with "what comes from elsewhere". By way of illustration, reception centers for GBV victims that combine medical and psychosocial approaches inspired by international models with local practices, such as the involvement in care of community leaders and community relays (notably the *bajenu gox*[3] in Senegal), generate protective knowledge. Clearly, protective knowledge transcends the usual homogenizing dichotomies. It can only be grasped from a monistic perspective, which makes it clear that knowledge is embedded in practices, which in turn are embedded in knowledge. In other words, knowledge and practices are part of a complex social system, in which inseparable elements are embedded at the material, representational and symbolic levels.

3 A Wolof term (Wolof is the language spoken predominantly in Senegal) that literally means "neighborhood aunt." The figure of *bajenu gox* draws on the traditional role of social diplomacy assigned to aunts in Senegalese families. From an anthropological perspective, this figure is of profound interest in understanding the dynamics of social transformations at play in the field of holistic care for GBV in Senegal. The *bajenu gox* are women leaders and community representatives who play a crucial role in the fight against GBV in Senegal. Their emergence and success are all the more remarkable given that they are taking place in a cultural and regional context marked by significant constraints. For example, the influence of religious leaders in Senegal continues to hamper legislative progress in the fight against GBV. Similarly, in other countries in the region, such as Guinea and Sierra Leone, attempts to retrain midwives and circumcisers as actors in the fight against GBV have not yielded convincing results. Yet, the *bajenu gox* have managed to establish themselves as key players in the fight against GBV, despite socio-structural obstacles. Their success is partly due to their cultural legitimacy and local roots. They are perceived as trustworthy figures, capable of navigating between traditional norms and the modern demands of the fight against GBV. It should be noted, however, that some of these actors are often criticized for prioritizing the preservation of social order at the expense of victims, by covering up rape or domestic violence (the infamous "Nëp nëppël" (Sall et al. 2024). Similarly, some cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation, may not necessarily be denounced, in the name of preserving traditional ways of thinking and doing, even though they are often problematic with regard to the health and rights of those affected. But, despite these ambiguities, which provide information on the complexity of practices and knowledge surrounding the fight against GBV in Senegal, the positive and pragmatic role of these community relays is now widely recognized, to the point that they have become essential partners for the State and for NGOs.

In addition, the empirical practices observed in local fields in West Africa, Central Africa (Cameroon in particular) and the Great Lakes region show that protective knowledge is not just a tool for action against GBV. They are also genuine levers for social transformation, capable of challenging social legitimacies and asymmetrical power relations between genders and social categories[4]. But equally, and perhaps more fundamentally, protective knowledge point at the epistemic hegemonies that structure scientific, political and practical positions on knowledge; particularly in the world of development actors. Protective knowledge makes a radical break with the naturalistic dualism that underpins the typological logics of knowledge, as well as the initiatives (undertaken in the name of these logics), to act on societies. In this respect, they are committed to the issues and urgent demands of decoloniality, which are currently at the heart of today's political and socio-economic transformations in Africa.

As an effective tool for thinking and healing GBV and their effects in African societies, in a decolonial way, protective knowledge goes beyond the critique of ideologies of universality and universalization of dominant perspectives on knowledge. They are fully modalities of operationalization and "operativeness" of effective social practices against social violence and already at work in contexts. This way of unravelling colonialities invites us to reconsider the ways in which knowledge is produced and validated in the "fields to be developed". It sheds light on the power dynamics that structure relationships between local actors and social workers, while recognizing the capacity of communities to appropriate and transform knowledge.

This special issue of *Global Africa* takes an innovative look at social violence (and GBV in particular) through the problematization of protective knowledge, which is seen as a decolonized third way (of knowledge and action) that addresses, better than others, the side-effects of reductionism, the simplifications of homogenization and the mirages of blissful essentialization. Each of the contributions is remarkable in the way it situates protective knowledge as the product of complex and often contradictory processes, involving reappropriation, rejection and transformation. This is what the following lines show.

In the article "Victim-perpetrator-collaborative-service-provider-intervention-model: A collaborative intervention strategy for intimate partner violence", Zintle Ntshongwana, Pius Tanga and Thobeka Nkomo explore the issue of domestic violence and its effects on the life experiences of marginalized women in South Africa. They demonstrate the scale and complexity of this phenomenon with its dramatic consequences, and open up their reflections on the possibility of building a holistic model for dealing with violence, based on research, international comparison and a continuous effort to offer the most appropriate responses for both victims and perpetrators.

George Rouamba, in his article entitled "Shelters for «Witches»: Safe Spaces and Producers of Protective Knowledge: The Social Reintegration of People Accused of Witchcraft in Burkina Faso", sets out to analyze the intervention model of this center. It shows how this care structure is a space for survival and reconstruction (physical, psychological and social) for people (mostly older women) who are victims of social stigmatization, amplified by exposure to patriarchal inequalities. The author demonstrates how the mobilization of local knowledge and domestic funding is crucial to sustain the interventions of the center studied, in a Burkinabe context where it seems urgent to rethink public policies to combat social inequalities and foster greater social inclusion.

In "It Takes a Village! (Re)inventing a safe haven for survivors of sexual violence in Senegal: Lessons from the experience of the Kullimaaroo center in Ziguinchor", Cheikh Sadibou Sakho and Ndèye Laïty Ndiaye address the issue of sheltering survivors of sexual violence (particularly adolescent girls) in Senegal. Drawing on the experience of the Kullimaaroo center and the experiences and viewpoints of the survivors it cares for, the authors analyze the specific features of the care "model" implemented there. The text shows how, in a national context where there is a shortage or even an absence of holistic public care structures (able to offer effective and adapted shelter services) for survivors of sexual violence, Kullimaaroo stands out as an endogenous and grounded response to multiple challenges. The article demonstrates that its success lies in the articulation of professional

4 The "We Heal Together" community psychosocial approach (CPA), developed in the Great Lakes Region and presented in the interview with Professor Kamuzinzi published in this issue, is highly illustrative in this regard.

knowledge and community knowledge and know-how, the valorization of survivors and their experiences, the involvement of a complex ecosystem of actors, among others. These factors are thus analyzed as avenues for generating transformational socio-institutional responses that support survivors of sexual violence in Senegal.

As for the interview with Professor Masengesho Kamuzinzi from the University of Rwanda, it looks back at his expertise and commitment to supporting communities in the Great Lakes region, marked by conflict and multi-faceted trauma. The cross-cutting theme of this discussion is his interest in protective knowledge rooted in African cultural heritage and its application, notably through the "We Heal Together" community psychosocial approach, aimed at healing individual, relational and social wounds resulting from violence and conflict. The discussion also addresses his in-depth analysis of the multiple levels of conflict in the region and the limits of imported models for providing sustainable solutions.

In addition to offering a "certain theory" of protective knowledge in itself, the contributions presented above provide information, implicitly and explicitly, on the differentiated and contextual ways in which this knowledge is produced. They also openly or otherwise problematize the issues and challenges of their social relevance, credibility, and legitimacy, particularly regarding the management of violence (social, ecological, institutional violence etc.) that primarily affects women. These contributions show, quite remarkably, that protective knowledge is fluctuating and based on the multitude, diversity and heterogeneity of actors and interactions that interconnect them around the social practices of care by which communities govern the violence they generate and with which they are carried out. This quality disposes them to escape the risks of immobility, the failures of maladaptation and the illusions of authenticity but it also brings them to the face serious challenges of the fragmentation of knowledge and the reduction of complexity. It is for this reason, among others, that it is important to track them empirically and methodically in order to theorize them with rigor and without any epistemic complex so that they critically contribute to illuminating, developing and framing inclusive, socially anchored and non-hegemonic practices in the fight against various forms of violence in Africa.

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