African Women and Girls in a Shrinking Civic Space

Bhekinkosi Moyo
Magdalene Madibela

CODESRIA

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Magdalene Madibela

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DAKAR

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
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About the Authors

Bhekinkosi Moyo is based at the Wits Business School where he serves on the faculty and directs the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Magdalene Madibela is an Independent Gender expert, Pan Africanist and Blogger.

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Introduction

This study looks at the civic space in Africa and the extent to which women and young girls are either enabled or limited to participate. For purposes of this study, it is important to make a distinction between a civic space and a public space. More often, the two are used interchangeably. The United Nations Habitat defines public spaces as 'referring to all spaces publicly owned or of public use. A public space is accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without profit motive' (UN Habitat cited in Kanes, Shoemaker and Carlise 2019: 4). Public spaces include infrastructure such as roads, streets, open spaces, national parks and public facilities like libraries, monuments and museums, among others. UNESCO further defines a public space as 'an area that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level' (UNESCO cited in Kanes, Shoemaker and Carlise 2019: 6). More recently, virtual spaces have been added to the definition of public spaces. An important element of the UNESCO definition is its direct reference to gender in relation to equal access to public spaces (ibid.).

Civic space, on the other hand, is defined by CIVICUS as 'the set of conditions that allow civil society and individuals to organise, participate and communicate freely and without discrimination, and in doing so, influence the political and social structures around them' (CIVICUS 2019). Civic Space (2009) defines a civic space as 'the political, legislative, social and economic environment which enables citizens to come together, share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape policy-making'. Kanes, Shoemaker and Carlise (2019) argue that the difference between a public space and a civic space is that public spaces are not derived specifically from a single purpose while civic spaces are derived from a purpose.

Just like in public spaces, cyberspaces are now included in the concept of civic spaces. David Sogge, for example, writes:

> [cyberspaces] are vastly larger and more active than they were in the 1990s. The internet and the new social media have inspired people to challenge public authorities and corporations on an unprecedented scale. In cyberspace, civic spaces have become larger, denser and more dynamic. But for emancipatory camps particularly, there is a downside: digital hatred. Beyond mere critique, there has come defamation, blackmail, physical threats and incitement to violence. Even where civic spaces are thought to be well run, and well protected, risks of intimidation are rising (2020: 92).

The concept of civic spaces therefore is much broader today than before to cater for all the activities that have moved aggressively online. In the analysis of women and girls' participation in the civic space, we take into account what happens in cyberspace. We use the term 'civic space' in this study somewhat differently to public space. We however note that a lot1 of what happens in the civic space takes place more often in the broader frame of the public space. There are other terms that one comes across such as public sphere and public domain that are also used interchangeably with either public space or civic space. This article does not use these terms because they entail something different from a civic space.

There are today a number of studies on the shrinking and shifting space for civil society globally (Ayvazyan 2019; Hossain et al. 2018) and in Africa (Moyo 2010). The discourse on shrinking civic space is a response to several developments and restrictions that have been imposed on civil society organisations either by governments, the private sector or by civil society contestations. Ayvazyan has concluded that the increasing popularity of civil society and its influence on policies and governments have led to an increase in measures that repress civil society (2019: 6). Governments have created administrative and legal barriers for civil society to operate freely and effectively. This phenomenon is popularly known as 'shrinking space'. Other factors that have contributed to the closing space for civil society include declining volumes of funding and economic downturns. Civil society has also been found to be responsible for closing its own space. According to Ayvazyan:

> There are contradictions, divisions and clashes within civil society that hamper or challenge the space for civil society without any body outside civil society having to interfere. Some CSOs may work against women's rights or promote religious extremism. Also civil society players might well work against one another and try and minimalize other players' scope and influence (2019: 8).

The shrinking space for civil society differs from context to context, country to country and region to region. The size of civil society, the mandates and missions of civil society, their capacity and capabilities, and the general environment under which they operate, inform some of the differences in how the space shrinks. For example, there are huge differences between democratic contexts and autocratic ones. In both contexts, however, the most vulnerable are minority groups, human rights defenders, and women's organisations.

There is a school of thought that views civic space not as shrinking but rather as changing or shifting. Naomi Hossain et al. reviewed literature on shrinking civic spaces and concluded that while a wave of closures of civic space has happened around the world, not all civil society actors are affected equally. The groups that are affected the most tend to be those of liberal and human rights traditions, often donor-funded and with a strong transnational link (2018: 7). They add that:

> Civic space may be conceptualised not as closing or shrinking overall but as changing in terms of who participates and on what terms. The rapid growth of the public digital space has dramatically reshaped the civic space for all actors, while right wing, extremists and neo traditionalist groups and urban protest movements have occupied demonstrably more of the civic space in the past decade. That civic space may be changing rather than shrinking also fits with the observation that many civil society actors report being pushed or pulled into closer relationships with political elites or the state, in order to continue to operate (ibid.).

When analysing how women and girls participate in civic spaces, and the extent to which structural and physical violence affects their participation, it is important to have a broader appreciation of how civil society is broadly experiencing the shrinking or shifting space. As part of broader civil society, women and their movements are affected by these shifts but in very particular ways. Wassholm argues that 'in the context of a shrinking space, beyond the implication this has for all human rights defenders, women human rights defenders are subject to attacks simply because they are women' (2018: 15). She points out that threats against women express themselves rather differently than threats against men and that 'violations against women are linked to traditions, norms and perceptions about how women should behave in society' (Wassholm 2018: 15). In addition, Elanor Jackson and Tina Wallace argue that women face a number of problems that are caused by poverty, their second class status in the home and community, their lack of access to key resources including decision-making and the social norms that curtail their freedoms of movement, choice and representation (2015: 3).

Urgent Action Fund has pushed for an intersectional feminist analysis of the shrinking space, primarily because it brings out the 'gendered impacts' and illuminates the resilience and commitment that feminist activists have shown under very difficult conditions. The organisation stated:

> In most cases, the equality and justice work of women, sexual minorities and gender non-conforming groups have historically challenged not only the actions of the state but its very male-centric and nationalistic foundation. These groups are subject to inordinate institutionalised violence. This violence manifests itself in many ways including the collusion between fundamental religious groups and the state (Urgent Action Fund: 2018: 2).

Several studies on women and their movements (Smith 2000; Cockburn 2000; Mejiuni 2013; Mama 2005; Rasool et al. 2002; Hunter and Williams 1981; Ogden 1996; Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen 2001; Marshall 2000; Gouws 2012; Gaidzano 1985) trace the struggles that women have waged to achieve equality and access to public and civic spaces as men. Amanda Gouws for example examines the position and involvement of women in the discipline of political science in Africa. She argued that because political science is by nature dominated by men and informed by the view that the public sphere is the only space for politics, it has naturally ignored gender as an important variable of study – resulting in few women in academic departments (2012: 59). Amina Mama, writing in 2003, argued that 'apart from gender neutral recruitment, women's entry into the academy was hampered by women's sexual and reproductive responsibilities that made it hard for women to compete with men' (2003: 117). These examples serve to illustrate the many struggles that women have engaged in over the years in order to be accepted in many of these civic spaces.

This article seeks to discuss four questions. The first is whether the civic space is shrinking uniformly for all classes, gender and generations. The second is the manifestation of physical and structural violence against women and girls and how such forms of violence affect the participation of women and girls in civic spaces. The third is a discussion of the strategies that are deployed by women and girls in order to counter various forms of violence. Finally, we unpack institutional safeguards that are in place for civil society to prevent violence on women and girls as well as facilitate their participation in civic spaces.

The above points are very broad for a deeper analysis of the questions under study. As a result the article makes use of examples of different civic spaces in order to demonstrate women's participation and the shrinking and/or changing nature of the civic space. In particular, the paper makes use of examples from civic spaces

such as sports associations, associational life, non-governmental organisations and CSOs, the academy and religious institutions, among others. These examples are not exhaustive but serve to demonstrate realities. As stated already, there is ample evidence showing that there is a widespread phenomenon that can be characterised as the closing of the civic space for civil society in general, and for women and girls in particular. Women and minority groups such as LGBTQI have always been at the receiving end of state and governments' punitive measures even before the literature on the closing space started emerging.

This study is based on a literature review on the civic space, women and girls. As stated above, the study focuses on civic space(s), and not on public space, or the public domain. Where reference is made to public space, it is mainly to isolate elements of the public space that embed a civic space. For example, a social movements gathering could take place in a park or even in a townhall. In other words the public space, in this case the townhall, would be the venue while the gathering would be the civic space.

In addition to a literature review, a mini-survey was conducted focusing on women in Zimbabwe. The survey was sent randomly to women academics, researchers and civil society groups. Because of the small number of respondents, the survey findings cannot be generalised. Instead we use these findings to describe how individuals interpreted their realities in that country. Of the forty-eight respondents, the majority were between the ages of 36 and 45 years (52 per cent), followed by those in the age group 26–35-years-old (29 per cent). There was a small margin between those in the ages 18–25 years (9 per cent) and those between 46 and 55 years (10 per cent). All respondents could read and write and 96 per cent had attained a higher education or tertiary qualification, while 4 per cent had attained secondary education. About 96 per cent of these resided in the city compared to 4 per cent who resided in peri-urban areas.

The findings from this survey are specific to a very small section and class of women. These are mainly educated women of the ages mainly between 18 and 55 years who live in the city, 46 per cent of whom are single, 48 per cent are married, and 98 per cent of whom are heterosexual. Their circumstances and experiences are different from women who live in rural or informal settings, with limited education and limited mobility due to traditional configurations. The experiences of the majority of women who responded also differ from those who don't subscribe to heterosexuality, for example, lesbians, queer and transgender. Further these women's experiences differ from those who are disabled. About 98 per cent of the respondents did not suffer from any form of disability. These specific

features and factors determine to a larger extent the degree to which these women's experiences would not mirror experiences of other women in the same country living under different circumstances. In other words, just as Naomi Hossain et al. (2018) argued, the space may be changing for some, and shrinking for others depending on the different centripetal and centrifugal forces that facilitate or limit participation. The findings from this mini-survey only serve to tell individual experiences and should not be taken to reach general conclusions.

Both literature and the results of the mini-survey show that the nature of violence that continues to be perpetrated against women and women activists in Africa is in many ways linked to the conditions under which they live. For example, the type of residence, type of transport and the type of employment conditions that women and girls are subjected to have implications for their participation in public space in general and civic spaces in particular. In addition, who one lives with can either create an enabling or a limiting environment. It has implications for women's safety, exposure to violence and their ability to be mobile, among others. Silvia Chant and Cathy McIlwaine have argued that there is a politics of space from the household to the cities at large:

> Women living in peri-urban slums devoid of services and infrastructure, residing in low quality shelter, and constrained in their ability to connect with the rest of the city may be more challenged than their counterparts in similarly marginalised but more centrally situated neighbourhoods (2013: 1).

As we argue, a number of strategies to combat violence against women and girls are limited due to conditions such as living arrangements, educational achievements, mobility and economic empowerment among others. It is very clear that overall, the civic space is shrinking for women and girls in different contexts but it is also changing in many ways. The institutional safeguards that have been put in place by civil society to prevent violence on women and girls have suffered huge weaknesses over time. As stated above, there is collusion between states, religious fundamentalists, patriarchy and other forces to discriminate, control and keep women and girls away from participating in many processes. In many African countries, there is an increase in the spate of attacks on and persecution of women activists leading to a shrinking and/or changing space for women's rights and their civic activities.[1]

2

The Changing and Shrinking Nature of the Civic for Women and Girls

This section reviews the different ways in which the civic space is shrinking and changing. Just like civil society, the women's movement is not homogenous across Africa or within regions and countries. The socio-economic, political and legal terrain in Africa is intricately complex and rigid. African states are at different levels of development, and in their democratisation processes, informing the environment in which civic and women's movements operate. The space has shrunk for civil society broadly but it has done so more visibly for minority and human rights groups, in particular women's movements. The Beijing Declaration and its Platform of Action notes that many women are even more vulnerable in that they are subjected to double or triple discrimination due to such factors as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability. This echoes Thomas Sankara's classical articulation of the position of women in a capitalist and patriarchal society. He wrote in October 1983:

> The weight of the centuries old traditions of our society has relegated women to the rank of beasts of burden. Women suffer doubly from all the scourges of neo-colonial society. First, they experience the same suffering as men. Second, they are subjected to additional suffering by men (Sankara 1983: 45).

Women and girls are a major part of the public and civic space, and their peculiar challenges mean that women's rights groups face additional layers of oppression due to their critical role in challenging patriarchy, promoting the rights of women and girls, and questioning oppressive cultural and religious practices, among others. The double-edged sword of the shrinking space for women affects both their organisations and their individuality. The overall shrinking civic space in Africa is precipitated by laws, policies, physical attacks, threats, and the demonisation of those who stand up for the rights of citizens, including women's rights groups.[2]

3

Is the Civic Space Shrinking?

The literature on the shrinking space for civil society has grown over the last few years. In addition a number of organisations such as CIVICUS and the International Centre for Non-Profit Law have been tracking measures that several governments have adopted to close the space for civil society. There is a general observation that civil society is viewed by many governments as a threat to their power. There are three major waves in the literature on the shrinking space. The first wave was in the early 2000s when the 'war on terror', after events of 9/11, limited the expansion of civil society formations through the introduction of restrictive financing to civil society and restrictions on other political and civic freedoms. A second wave was a response to the rise of the internet, in particular the WikiLeaks saga that attracted sharp reactions from major global powers. And the third wave was a response to the rise of the 'Islamic state' (Hossain et al. 2018).

These waves paint a picture of how historically the space for civil society has been affected. There is no doubt that the civic space has been shrinking in most parts of the world. The mini-survey results from Zimbabwe also add to the notion that the space is indeed shrinking. More than 70 per cent of respondents believed that the civic space is closing for them. While these results cannot be used to reach generalised conclusions, they nevertheless point to individual experiences.

Karen Ayvazyan offers different trends of the shrinking space. The first trend is that governments have created legal and administrative barriers that make the operational environment for civil society very difficult. Groups that receive most of this repression and harassment, among several tactics, are human rights defenders, advocacy organisations and minority groups that are funded mainly by international donors (2019: 8). Governments respond to civil society and other formations based

on some of their historical experiences. The historical context of African countries contributes immensely to the nature of the mandates of civic movements in Africa. Each country's political history determines the kinds of responses from civil society, trade unions, women's movements and human rights groups, among others. Some countries in Africa that underwent major political uprisings in the late twentieth century have a confrontational approach to civil society. For example, in countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa, the women's movement evolved out of and alongside the pro-liberation movements. In these countries, women's movements emerged from this period clear that they were challenging a system of male domination and therefore pushed for women's representation in parliament and other spheres of government. In Angola, the women's movement was explicitly political in nature; it was useful in mobilising popular support for the political parties vying for power. Inevitably this arrangement deteriorated overtime with the government ceasing to support the women's movement. In countries such as Botswana and Lesotho, where there was never a liberation struggle, women's organisations have always been subjected to marginal welfare work and not necessarily recognised as an integral part of decision-making. And in Botswana and Namibia, middle-income countries when donors pulled out in the early 1990s, the overdependence on government funding by the women's civic movement weakened their voice and power.

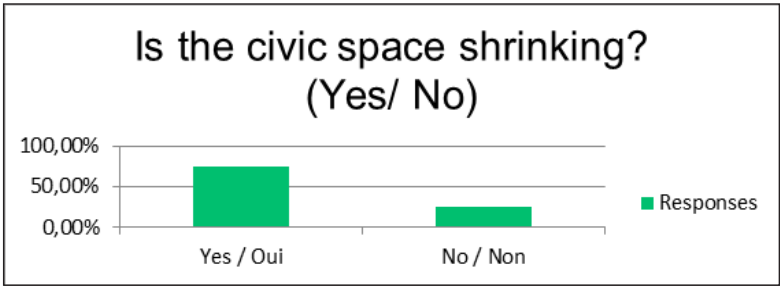

Figure 1: Is the civic space shrinking?

The second trend in response to civil society is that governments require organisations to get prior approval from government in order to receive international funding. This is the case in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring where the Ministry of Social Solidarity requires CSOs to get approval before receiving foreign funding. Failure to seek approval can lead to imprisonment. For example in 2013, the court imposed jail sentences on forty-three representatives of civil society for failing to meet this requirement (Rutzen 2015 cited in Ayvazyan 2019: 9).

The third trend is the enactment of domestic laws and regulations to govern civil society activities (Hossain et al. 2018; Moyo 2010). These range from protest, internet use, freedom of expression, assembly and association. From a distance, these laws appear to be addressing issues of accountability and transparency but in reality they are used to curtail the freedoms of civil society, for example, through stringent requirements for registration and reporting. Moyo (2010) studied the regulation of civil society in Africa and showed among other things that NGO laws have mushroomed across Africa targeting civil society organisations that work mainly in the governance and human rights sector. Moyo showed that in democratic states where the enactment of NGO laws was a result of a consultative process between the state and civil society, the regulation appeared progressive but lacked implementation. However in the authoritarian states, there was no consultation with civil society in developing the laws and the outcome was a very restrictive environment. Further, Moyo demonstrated that the trend to promulgate NGO laws had spread to almost all African countries. Most of these were in the aftermath of 9/11 and used national security as a cover to curtail the freedoms of civil society.

A survey of trends affecting civic space conducted in 2016 showed that many states have continued to use a variety of tools to undermine the influence of civic actors by means ranging from the adoption and manipulation of laws that restrict the ability of civil society organisations to register, protest, and access resources and, in extreme cases, have compelled the closure, de-registration and expulsion of civil society organisations (ICNL 2016).

The fourth trend is the restriction of freedom of assembly and association. In most countries, new laws have been enacted to govern advocacy and protest activities. There is a requirement for CSOs to apply to demonstrate and public order laws are invoked under these circumstances. More often gatherings are banned and demonstrations are heavily monitored. Naomi Hossain et al. argue that the civic space is not only under pressure in authoritarian regimes but also in settings where significant power shifts are underway both to and from more dominant arrangements of power (2018: 8). They contend further that in countries where authorities are predatory in nature, humanitarian and economic crises are among the most important developmental impacts of restricted civic space, and human rights activists are particularly under pressure (ibid. 8). And where the environment is characterised by democratisation, these writers argue that there is a tendency to draw civil society closer to power; at times this might lead to a suffocating relationship with the state or co-optation preventing independent critique or thinking.

The fifth trend relates to the criminalisation, stigmatisation and delegitimisation of human rights defenders. For example, LBBTQI groups are delegitimised through accusations that their actions undermine the family, morality and traditional values. The same is true of defenders of sexual and reproductive rights (Ayvazyan 2019: 11). In Uganda, for example, the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity acts more or less as police for morality. Some women rights organisations have a lot in common with society and often find it difficult working on LGBTI issues, for fear of marginalisation by government and by some donors. The independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity highlights killings, rapes, mutilations, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, arbitrary detentions, abductions, harassment and physical and mental assaults as particularly widespread. In Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Mauritania and northern Nigeria, homosexuality is punishable by death. In Uganda, Tanzania and Sierra Leone, offenders can receive life imprisonment for homosexual acts, although the law is not enforced in Sierra Leone. In addition to criminalising homosexuality, Nigeria has enacted legislation that would make it illegal for heterosexual family members, allies and friends of LGBT people to be supportive. The space for LGBTI civic organisations is much smaller or non-existent in most countries in Africa.

The sixth trend is the restriction on the freedom of expression online and offline. This includes the shutting down of the media, harassment of journalists through arbitrary arrests, media censorship, restrictive media laws and closure of the internet among many others. Recently there has been an increase in platforms that are financed by the state to troll CSOs and human rights defenders, spread fake news and promote propaganda. The rise of social media has been both as asset for free speech and a danger to activists as more governments increase control measures for fear of the power of social media to act as a mobilisation platform as happened in North Africa during the Arab Spring.

The growing reach of the internet, including the rapid spread of mobile information and communications technologies, and the wide diffusion of social media, have presented new opportunities to address violence against women and girls. At the same time, these spaces and tools are being used as tools to inflict harm on women and girls. Cyber-violence against women and girls is emerging as a global problem. According to the UNESCO Report (2015), many girls and women have come forward to expose physical and verbal attacks on them, and teenage girls are driven to suicide by online trolling (ibid.: 23).

Other trends worth noting include intimidation of civil society actors through arrests, physical violence, and in some countries abductions; capturing civil society spaces by establishing parallel organisations, and false counterterrorism measures.

As shown below, responses from the mini-survey in Zimbabwe also indicate that women who responded saw government restrictions, curtailment of freedom of expression and general administrative and legal barriers as drivers of the shrinking space for women and girls.

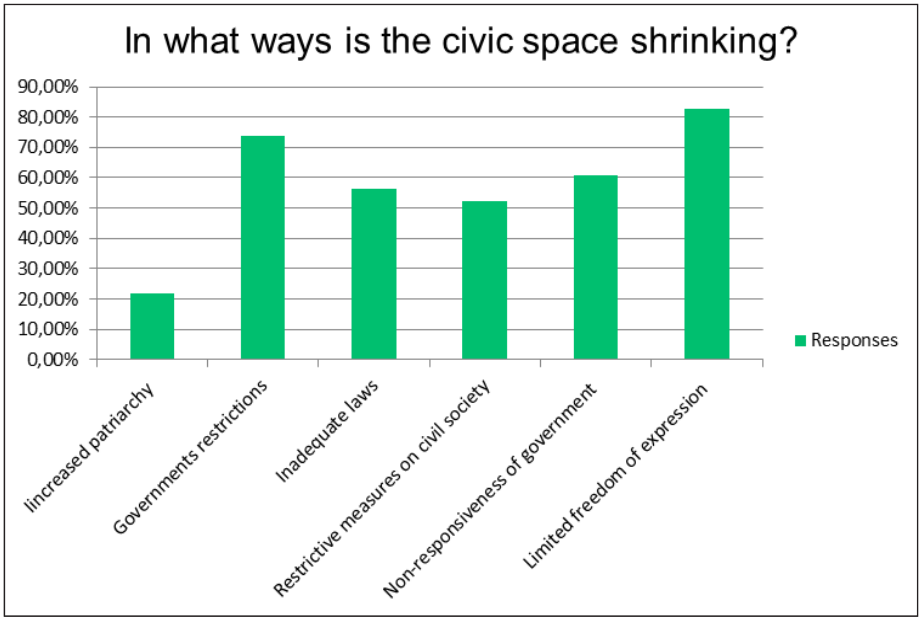

Figure 2: In what way is the civic space shrinking?

The trends above illustrate that most women live under conditions that are forever limiting them to fully express themselves publicly and participate effectively in civic platforms.

4

Is the Space Shifting?

As alluded to above, there are different analytical viewpoints regarding what is happening to the civic space. Some writers argue that what we are witnessing is the changing of the civic space and not necessarily it shrinking or closing down. Civil society formations in general and women in particular are not homogenous, and while their experiences at most might be similar, there are still some differences in how they are affected. David Sogge has argued that the metaphor of shrinking space seems to apply only to prominent civil rights movements and independent media. He contends that the same metaphor does not adequately capture what is really happening with the civic space. In his view, even in authoritarian regimes, civic spaces are not shrinking but rather expanding. He gives examples of the growth in religious bodies, business associations and the massive flourishing of various sports, community, cultural, ethnic and professional associations (Sogge 2020: 77). While this may be true in terms of growth in numbers, what Sogge misses is the fact that in authoritarian contexts, the proliferation of civil society organisations is sometimes a response to a closing space. A revolution occurs in contexts of repression. Furthermore, when civil society goes underground in repressive regimes, it does not cease to exist. It simply adopts a survivalist mechanism. Another reason Sogge gives to advance the argument that the space is expanding rather than closing is that not all groups suffer the repression of the state. He is here thinking of state-created organisations that crowd out other formations. These are usually protected by the state. Sogge concludes that:

> It may therefore be more realistic to assume that civic space is not everywhere shrinking, but it is evolving in ways that conventional perspectives fail to capture. To see this more clearly, wider lenses are needed, together with clearer terms. It is not only government autocrats and military chieftains who restrict civic spaces for emancipatory initiatives. Non-state actors pursuing material interests – corporations, landowners or bankers – often favour measures that confine civic

> spaces and criminalise activities in those spaces. Also, under-illuminated are non-state actors whose cultural or religious agendas call for repression of emancipatory camps in civil society. Official toleration and subsidization of those actors, such as exempting them from taxes or contracting them for social service delivery are re-shaping civic spaces and making them sites of contestation (ibid.: 78).

Responses from the mini-survey also seem to contend with what Sogge (2020) and Hossain et al. (2018) have argued: that the space is also changing, shifting and expanding. About 80 per cent of the respondents thought that the space was changing or shifting compared to 20 per cent who did not think so. Hossain et al., for example, write that:

> It is less the size or freedom than the shape or nature of participation in civic space which has changed in recent years. The space for formal civil society organisations, in particular human rights defenders, social movements and struggles of marginalised and disempowered groups such as women, racialised or ethnic minorities and indigenous populations, NGOs and the independent media, has been restricted in recent years. At the same time, civic space has arguably widened for some groups. A wave of spontaneous protests over austerity, economic crisis, corruption and authoritarianism has also occupied part of the civic space in the past decade, and the expansion of virtual or digital public space is also a feature of the recent past. Civic space is changing, even while it is closing for democratic and human rights based groups (2018: 14).

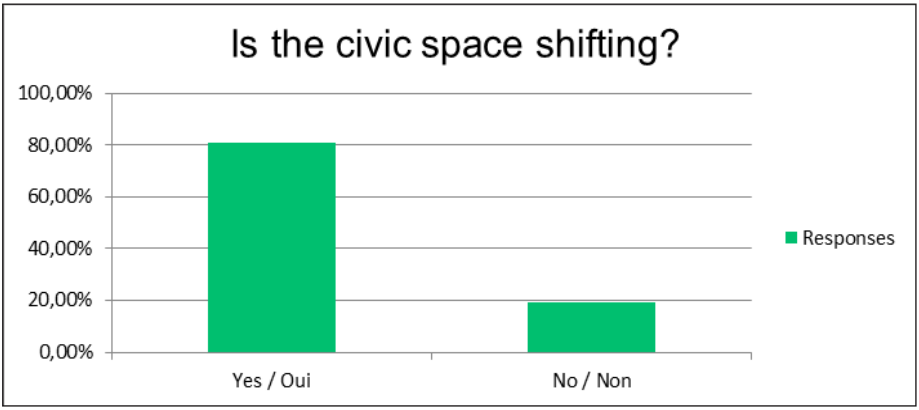

Figure 3: Is the civic space shifting?

There are several factors that could explain why some women think the space is shrinking while others think it is changing, expanding or shifting. Women within the civic movement are not homogenous. Some are more elite with a much more feminist agenda, while others are community based activists. Although the

agendas meet the needs of different target groups, there is a tendency to shrink the space of the less privileged and less educated women's rights activists, for example, in the competition for limited resources. There are also ongoing tensions between women's rights veterans with more experience and other women who are not positioned to be given the attention that the veterans get. The veterans tend to dominate and not cede the space to the younger feminists to actively participate in leadership positions. The struggle over limited opportunities and exposure between the two groups is often evident. A crisis of lack of continuity when the older generation retires from the movement is imminent and requires redress.

The civic space is therefore not shifting or changing uniformly for all classes, genders and generations. There are several factors behind this. For example there are differences between and among countries in the way different classes, genders and generations are affected. For example, compared to more peaceful countries, the different conditions of work by civic and women's movements in politically volatile states are highly restrictive. However in these contexts, women with capital and who are mobile are affected differently than those without. Race and class also play huge roles in how the space is restricted or expanded. Countries in post-conflict situations such as DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola and Mozambique still have fragile and weak institutional mechanisms that often are not strong enough to sustain civic activities.

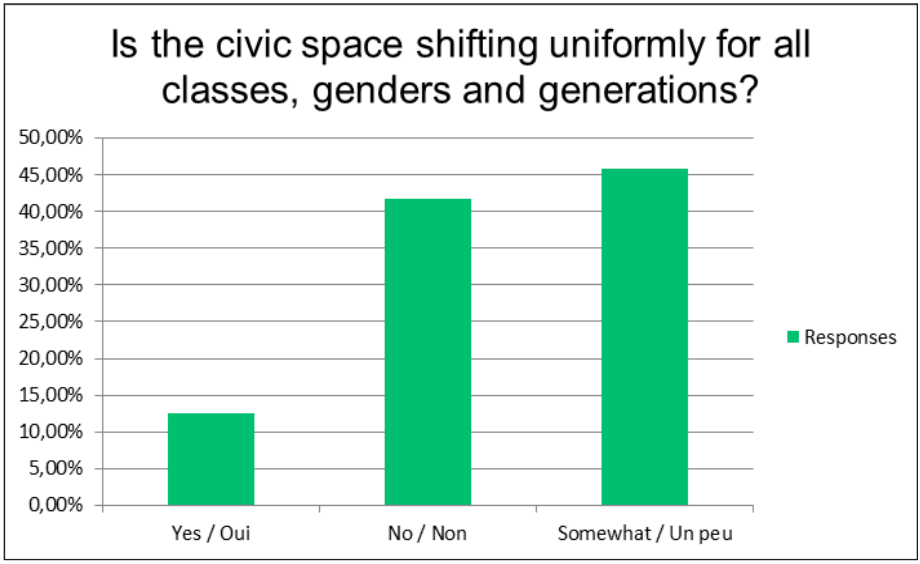

Figure 4: Is the civic space shifting uniformly for all classes, genders and generations?

There is also a view that the space for women is not changing or shifting but has remained stagnant. It is argued that the space has remained at the level of protecting and maintaining gains made in the past, with relatively little activity in agenda-setting. This relative lack of vibrancy is attributed, to a large extent, to the increased role of governments, which have now taken over the new responsibilities for gender policy formulation and implementation, but lack the drive or enthusiasm to implement gender initiatives. There are also views that the space is shifting and more opportunities have been created. Amanda Gouws, for example, traces the many gains that women have achieved in the gendering of social sciences. She argues that in the context of Africa, gender studies started outside the academy and migrated in. She writes that a conscious gendering of social science subjects developed in professional intellectual networks such as the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) and CODESRIA (2012: 60). Through several studies and meetings, the academy was slowly gendered. For example, in 1991, CODESRIA tried to integrate gender into its analysis by holding a gender analysis and social science workshop in Dakar. The outcome of this workshop was a book edited by Ayesah Imam, Amina Mama and Fatow Sow (1997) titled Engendering Social Sciences in Africa. In 1996, CODESRIA established a task force on gender and in 2000, a multi-national working group on gender and national politics in Africa was started. These meetings continued and have now culminated in Gender Institutes that are aimed at 'strengthening the scholarship and analytical skills of young researchers' (Bennett 2007). Amina Mama wrote in 1996 that as a result of AAWORD and Women in Nigeria, gender scholarship had increased and African feminists had attempted to get an institutional foothold (1996: 6). Pereira (2002), for example, traces the gendering of CODESRIA publications over time. In the beginning, CODESRIA publications are said to have remained gender-blind because their gender analysis ran parallel to rather than being integrated into the mainstream intellectual activities. It can therefore be argued that while women remain weakly integrated into the academy, the space for participation has somewhat expanded over time. Figure 6 shows that there is a recognition that more opportunities have opened up over time for some women. The academy and research by feminists are such examples although a lot still needs to be done.

The same cannot be said of women's participation in sports and religion, for example. Jimoh Shehu (2010) argues that even though sport appears to be global, men and women, different classes and cultures do not experience its norms and practices in the same way. Sport is not neutral. She concludes that because dominant ideology defines men in opposition to women, and declares certain

domains such as the home as female and sport that takes place in public space as male, this excludes women from taking part in sport and from participating in public spaces. It goes without saying that this naturalisation of sport as male territory for nurturing hegemonic masculine qualities tends to exclude from the sport arena other bodies that are marked, gendered, sexed or classed as female or feminine (Shehu 2010: ix). In addition, women are not only excluded from mainstream sport but they are subjected to violence and sexual assault when they attend these public sporting events. For example, Molly Manyonganise argues in the context of Zimbabwe that the majority of women are restrained from full participation in sporting activities due to social construction of spaces earmarked for women and men (2010: 13). The same attitudes are found in other countries. For example in Malawi and Nigeria, women face ironies and dilemmas when they seek to partake in the growth of popular sports as players, sports managers, spectators and mass media consumers. Women are defined in terms of domesticity and feminine values, and female sporting bodies are presented as deviant sex objects.

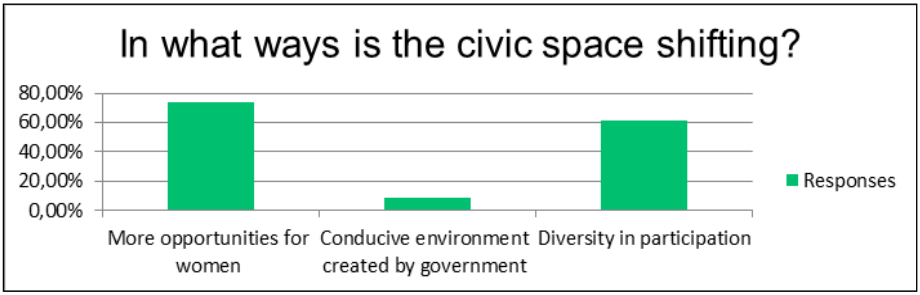

Figure 5: In what ways is the civic space shifting?

In religious spaces, available literature shows that women are the majority of the active members and the sustaining force in almost every congregation (Kasomo 2010: 10). However the church has continuously been accused of supporting and perpetuating unjust social and institutional customs and myths which further marginalise women and girls. The church is more rigid than secular society in its approach to gender issues and inclusion. Religious fundamentalism remains a limiting factor to women's participation in religious organisations and society, and women's access to leadership positions (ibid.: 12) with leadership roles secured only for men in the religious sector.

5

The Legal Framework for the Protection of Women and Girls from Violence

We have discussed the extent to which the civic space is shrinking, shifting and/or expanding for women and girls. In this section, we focus on physical and systemic violence that women are subjected to; and analyse how it affects women's participation in civic spaces. It is estimated that 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives.[3] Some national studies show that up to 70 per cent of women experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.[4] Figure 7 provides views from the mini-survey in Zimbabwe. Although these findings are not generalisable, nonetheless they give us insight into what this particular group of women is experiencing. What is noteworthy is that cyber-bulling seems to be on the increase (35 per cent). This is worth noting because the cyberspace as a civic space is a new phenomenon that has quickly adopted tactics to silence women just as happens in physical spaces. The high levels of emotional abuse (70 per cent) are also indicative of the many factors at play.

There is a substantive amount of literature that details the various campaigns that women have embarked on historically to address their position in society. Ahikire, Musimenta and Mwiine, for example, wrote in Feminist Agenda that:

> The campaign for women's emancipation in public life has taken several years and efforts, and the outcomes are reflected in international human rights frameworks as well as national efforts that acknowledge women's rights to participate in public space (2015: 26).

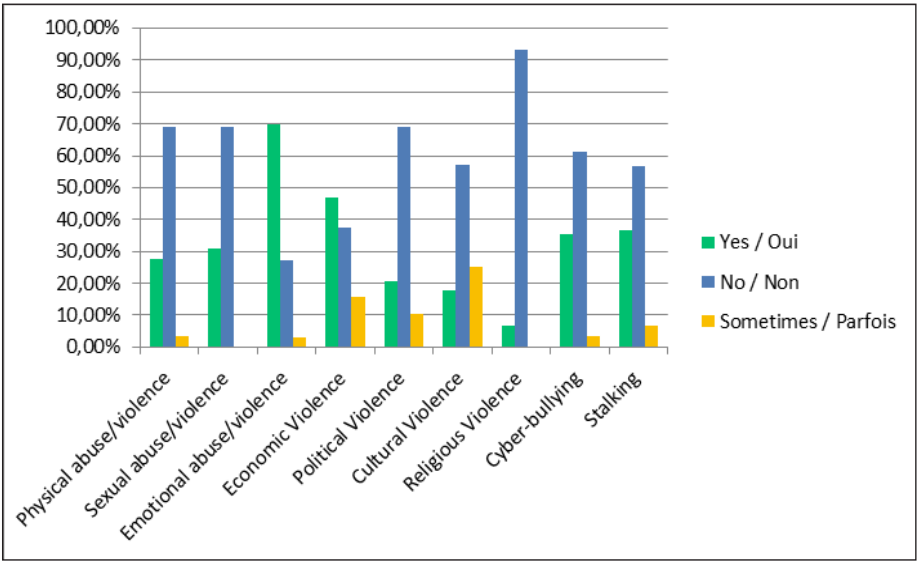

Figure 6: Experiences of abuse

In some countries in Africa such as Rwanda, Uganda, Senegal, Mozambique, Tanzania and South Africa, among others, there has been progress, for example, in parliamentary representation, the transformation of the judiciary to have women in top leadership, and introduction of several gender sensitive policies.

The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),[5] often called the 'international bill of rights for women', has the most comprehensive provisions for the protection of women's rights. All ratifying states of CEDAW are obliged to ensure and provide for gender equality in all relevant legislation in all aspects of economic, social, cultural and political life. States are supposed to repeal all discriminatory provisions; enact provisions to guard against discrimination against women and establish public institutions to guarantee effective protection of women against discrimination.

During the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) was adopted, advocating for the advancement and empowerment of women in all sectors of economic, social, cultural and political life. The Beijing Platform stresses the necessity of changing values, attitudes, practices and priorities at national, regional and international levels in order to ensure equality between men and women.

The African Union has also contributed to the international legal standard setting on women's rights through the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol 2003).[6] The Maputo Protocol provides explicit rights and protections guaranteed to women, including the rights to dignity, life, integrity, security and equal status, and protections similar to those afforded to men in marriage and divorce, among others. Notably, the Protocol calls upon African states to integrate a gender perspective in their policy decisions, legislation, development plans, programmes and activities. The Protocol recognises the right of women to live in a positive cultural context and also lays stress on the health of women, including their sexual and reproductive rights.

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have also adopted various protocols, declarations and policies that guarantee the promotion of women and their protection against all forms of discrimination. For example, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which is made up of sixteen Southern African and island nations, adopted a Protocol on Gender and Development in 2008[7] and later revised it in 2016. The Protocol espouses the basic principles of the Maputo Protocol, such as the need to enshrine gender equality and equity in all SADC constitutions and to ensure that these rights are not compromised by any provisions, laws or practices.

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1993 describes abuse as any act of violence 'that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'. The UN further defines Violence Against Women (VAW) as 'a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.'

6

Structural Violence against Women and Girls and its Limiting Effects on Participation in the Civic Space

Socialisation and its forces including patriarchy define the role of women in society as that of nurturers and carers while men are expected to be defenders, and fighters. Women in the civic movement are often faced with hostility and violence as a way of discouraging them from participating actively in the civic movement as dictated by culture or religion. Urgent Action Fund argues that the phenomenon of 'shrinking space' is a result of a deliberate effort to silence dissenting voices. These are actions that emanate from a reasserting hetero-patriarchal governance (2018). In most cases, the attempt by states to curtail freedoms of citizens and subsequently of women and girls leads to self-censorship, decreased ability and space for organising and fragmentation of the women's movement(s). The women's movement has benefited historically from solidarity from other networks. This is constrained by efforts to curtail the space for civic engagement. Other impacts include trauma, and a decline in material conditions for women, especially those who live in countries where drastic laws and policies have been adopted. These laws also affect the funding of these groups which in the past has been decreasing as a result of the un-conducive environment for donors and development actors.

While the civic space has been shrinking globally, there are some regions where it has always been precarious. Among African countries, there are countries that have always been very oppressive, controlling and more often scared of the civic movement. In Zimbabwe, for example, there has been a trend to round up activists, arrest them, torture them, and increasingly there is a trend to abduct

women especially those who are political actors as well. When arrested, the state always sets very stringent conditions such as bail. Bail is set very high for a country that does not have readily available cash and if one wanted to withdraw money from the bank there are restrictions on how much can be withdrawn daily. The result is that activists end up spending a considerable amount of time in jails awaiting trial. This has a resultant effect of demoralising activism.

Across Africa, there has been a mushrooming of repressive laws that limit the scope and extent of civic activism. In Ethiopia, for example, the 200 Charities and Societies Proclamation defines all NGOs that receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from foreign sources as 'foreign charities' and prohibits them from carrying out politically related activities, or activities related to human rights or governance (Moyo 2010).

The nature of the state and the patriarchal framework under which it operates have led to the oppression, and marginalisation, of women and girls. This continues to be the norm in every society and community, denying women and girls the right to freedom of expression, and freedom of association. These violations are linked to traditions, norms and perceptions about how women should behave in society. Women in the civic movement are often faced with hostility and violence as a way of discouraging them from participating actively in it. There are threats against women who express themselves differently. The same threats are not directed to men. Threats against women's rights activists' families and children are often used as a way to silence them. The former UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, pointed out that women are at greater risk than men when it comes to specific forms of violence and abuse.[8] There is a clear link between violence meted out on women and the ways in which they are discriminated against.

The different forms of discrimination and the attendants effects are ongoing and cut across women and girls of different age groups. A pattern seems to have developed where patriarchy, sexism, religion, and economy had been used to either violate or discriminate against women and girls between four and ten times in the six-month period.

Public shaming and attacking women activists' reputations are effective tools in a patriarchal world. Attacking the reputations of women activists is a key tactic often employed by those opposed to their work. Many times, the defamation hinges on sexuality baiting and spreading of rumours about them to destroy their credibility in society.[9]

As stated earlier, the structural and systemic violence against women and girls happens in intimate spaces, in the household and in public spaces. In the household, patriarchy, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and economic abuse are the most prevalent. This is supported by global literature as well as by African feminists and writers (Gaidzano 1985; Mejiuni 2013). Silvia Chant and Cathy McIlwaine have argued that since women's access to land and by extension to capital is usually through a male figure, this poses a huge challenge for women. For example divorced or deserted women face evictions or homelessness in the event of a dissolution of marriage. The same applies to widows who are subjected to property grabs in several African societies by their husbands' relatives (2013: 5).

Women's rights activists are also subjected to 'honour violence', or killings may often be perpetrated to family members if women are considered inappropriate or to be putting the name of the family into disrepute as per religious or ethnic norms and values. Honour violence may include physical, sexualised and psychological violence as well as other forms of control such as forced marriages, or coerced marriages of women with the men who raped them. This does not only involve physical violence but can constitute how the community perceives a woman's behaviour that can be interpreted as shameful.[10] Activists are also prone to rumours of lost virginity and adultery and such rumours are perceived as irreparable dishonour on the family/community, which in extreme cases lead to decisions to murder.

Research also shows that women and girls are also at greater risk of violence in their own surroundings and neighbourhoods than in cities at large. This is particularly true in cases where they have to fetch water, firewood or use communal facilities. Young girls in particular in these situations are vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Elderly women and those who don't conform to gender norms are also subjected to physical, sexual and other forms of abuse. There is also the case of women who live alone or are independent. More often they are abused as a way to control them.

From the homes to the neighbourhood and then the cities, women and girls are not spared. They continue to be discriminated against. For example, women's access to different spaces in urban cities, in particular public spaces like parks, museums, libraries and historical sites is generally more limited than that of men. More often there are boundaries around what is forbidden and what is allowed, and use of spaces that is informed by patriarchal planning and power relations. For example, women are not allowed to breastfeed anywhere in public in most

cities. There are spaces that require a particular form of dress code, particularly in religious and traditional settings. This expands even to matters relating to behaviour. In some countries there are government departments or ministries that are responsible for ethics and morality. More often these function to police women and minority groups' behaviours. This is further exacerbated by forms of transport and planning that prioritise certain routes, times and forms of travel. Women's mobility, as Chant and McIlwaine (2013) show, is constrained by male biased transport planning which prioritises peri-urban areas to the city centres during peak hours of the day. Yet women's occupation with home chores and other informal undertakings cannot be fit into this kind of planning. Additionally, restriction on female mobility severely jeopardises their prospects, for example to complete school, their ability to go into the labour market and create social networks (Chant and McIlwaine 2013: 9).

Women's rights activists are subjected to travel bans as a way to silence them with fear. Travel bans add to the isolation of women activists caused by smear campaigns, making it impossible for them to travel and receive international support. A well-known lawyer and women's rights activist from Egypt witnessed another female activist being murdered by the police during a demonstration. Instead of being a witness, she was accused of taking part in an illegal demonstration. The trial is constantly postponed. She was banned from travelling, subjected to judicial harassment and her bank accounts were frozen.[11] A woman human rights defender from DRC is so used to having arbitrary visits by police and other security institutions in her office that she decided to adopt an effective strategy – the messier her desk is, the less the chance of someone finding anything important.[12]

Women's organisations dealing with gender issues that are generally unacceptable to national leadership or society at large are often ostracised and marginalised. A woman activist from Kenya reported that 'women and girls as well as organisations who defend fellow women are labelled lesbians, divorcees. Often times, the name of the organisation is sought to be denigrated by calling it as an organisation training lesbians'.[13] Recently in Tanzania, women were arrested, harassed and intimidated for working on sexual and reproductive health related issues.

In cities, gender differences in power and rights are a very important consideration in order to understand how structural and systemic violence affects women's participation in public and civic spaces. Many years of advocacy have seen an increase in the presence of women in civic engagement. Political spaces have

also opened up somewhat for women especially in the wake of many initiatives that have sought to democratise governance and stakeholder engagements. Despite this, women in urban settings across the world have been identified by the World Health Organisation as being at risk of gender-based violence (GBV). This led to the UN-Habitat and UNIFEM's (2009) joint establishment of the Global Programme on Safe Cities Free from Violence. Women in cities often suffer from street violence, for example, abductions, rape or murder.

COVID-19 measures adopted by several governments have also exposed the nature of violence meted out on women in the event they want to express their views or seek basic needs. Hard lockdowns have meant that women are exposed to their partners more often than before and in most cases there have been reports of increased GBV.

Sexual harassment and other forms of violence can have a profound impact on a woman's ability to continue her work in civil society. Threats to violate the boundaries of a woman's physical sanctity are used as an effective intimidation tool by perpetrators to make her feel helpless. Above all types of sexual harassment or violence, most women fear rape – of themselves and/or their family members.[14]

Sexual violence, in particular rape, is used against women activists as a means to silence, punish them, or as revenge to the enemies as a weapon of war. In the UN resolution passed on 19 June, the Security Council noted that 'women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.' The resolution demanded the 'immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians.'[15]

The issue is further exacerbated as often the offence of rape is not reported due to the fear of being further victimised either through violence or stigma. This is one reason for the percentage of prosecuted rape cases remaining extremely low when compared to the total number of cases taking place. According to an activist from Nigeria, 'Because of social and cultural beliefs, some issues [assault, rape and abuse] are not to be discussed openly and so victims face discrimination if they report abuse'. An activist from Mozambique reported being subjected to threats of sexual violence herself when she urged a 14-year-old victim of rape to testify against the perpetrator in court. She felt that the perpetrator was emboldened to do this because there was no structure in the country to protect women human rights defenders.[16]

According to Human Rights Watch, arguably the epicentres of sexual violence against women are in the DRC as well as Liberia and the Darfur region of Sudan. Available data sourced from the local health centres in the DRC's South Kivu province estimate that forty women are raped in the region every day. In Liberia, which is slowly recovering after a 13-year civil war, a government survey in ten counties in 2005–6 showed that 92 per cent of the 1,600 women interviewed had experienced sexual violence, including rape.[17] These numbers are most likely an underestimate because women fear the retaliation and social ignominy that reporting a rape could bring. In Darfur, Human Rights Watch reported that women and girls live under the constant threat of rape by Sudanese government soldiers, members of the government-backed Janjaweed militia, rebels and ex-rebels.[18]

For women's rights activists, the risk of being arrested and put in detention or prison involves a deep fear of sexual violence. Regardless of whether a woman detainee is subject to sexual violence or not, just the suspicion of what might happen could destroy a woman's reputation. While male activists are often portrayed as heroes after imprisonment, women activists are more likely to suffer from the social stigma of a possible rape inside prison walls.

Often, the main perpetrators tend to be police who use brute force to break up peacefully assembling activists. As stated by an activist in Tunisia, 'Police have beaten women activists in public, saying they are prostitutes'. In Uganda, 'Women activists who have challenged state institutions through peaceful public protests have been physically assaulted and thrown like cattle into waiting police trucks with utter disregard for their dignity'. The sexual abuse of a woman's rights activist in custody and her rape can result in pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS. Promoting and protecting women's rights can be an additional risk factor, as the assertion of some such rights is seen as a threat to patriarchy and disruptive of cultural, religious and societal norms.

While some women's rights issues, such as women's health and women's economic empowerment, have made it onto political agendas and are unchallenged as mainstream human rights work, feminists organising around women's and trans people's participation and voices, or around issues that challenge state power, quickly become targets.

7

Strategies Developed by Women and Girls to Counter Violence in the Civic Space

The women's rights civic movement across the African continent continues to fight for core civic space rights – the rights to freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression despite the fact that obstacles remain rampant. Women's rights groups continue to be creative to counter violence in the civic space through various means such as advocacy and lobbying for an enabling environment for effective implementation of legal and policy frameworks in line with international standards, promotion of positive political, social and cultural norms, attitudes and behaviours at national and community levels to prevent violence against women in the civic space. Women activists continue to advocate for the strengthening of institutional capacities for violence prevention and response especially within the law enforcement offices and other government entities. Women's rights movements continue to strengthen capacity-building for coordination, data collection, monitoring and evaluation of violence prevention and response. The civic movement also fights for measures to build stronger coalitions and networks, mobilisation for greater voice and agency, among others. One of the strategies is belonging to various associations. Respondents to the survey for this article show that most women belong to an association of one form or the other.

The women's rights movement continues to advocate and lobby for an enabling environment for effective implementation of legal and policy frameworks such as the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, CEDAW, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, notably goal 5 on 'gender equality', and goal 16 to 'promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies'. Engagements with governments and key stakeholders on the effective implementation of the adopted

international and regional gender equality instruments have been a major part of the women's rights movement in Africa. Organisations such as Women in Law of Southern Africa (WLSA) WILDAF, FEMNET and Gender Links provide awareness-raising on gender equality instruments for effective domestication and implementation of the relevant laws to make a difference in the lives of women and girls. Campaigns have been mounted to push for signing, ratification and domestication of the international and regional gender protocols. Where laws have been domesticated, implementation has been slow and often inconsistent. Women's rights organisations have played an instrumental role in challenging governments to address violence against women and create a conducive environment to tackle the issue in line with the international instruments.

Women's rights organisations have invested in GBV prevention programmes that encompass the promotion of positive political, social and cultural norms, attitudes and behaviours at national and community levels to prevent violence against women in society including in the civic space. The recent wave of the movement has demonstrated resistance of repression and patriarchy often resulting in severe violence and public ridicule. In Botswana, women's rights organisations marched against taxi drivers who were undressing young women who dressed in what they perceived as short clothes. The women marched under the banner '#I wear what I want'. In South Africa, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, women's rights groups marched to publicly condemn violence against women and girls. Globally a wave of activism was activated by the #MeToo movement.

While governments in Africa have purported structures and institutions to deal with violence against women, it is quite clear that the institutions are weak and incapacitated to protect women from violence. The civic movement has invested time and resources to support governments and other relevant institutions to strengthen institutional capacities for effective response to violence prevention and provide support to the survivors. Law enforcement officers have been trained to understand the meaning of violence, the law processes to follow and, most importantly, the referral system to tackle the issue in an integrated manner.

Movement building remains key in the mobilisation of the masses for a common purpose, collective action and voice. Several studies have been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa with a view to support and reinvigorate the women's movement. It is important to mobilise the masses, ensuring that there is a common goal in advocacy. Resources remain a challenge to extend the work of women's rights organisations in Africa. Funding to deal with violence against women remains a

huge challenge for women rights organisations in Africa due to stringent rules and requirements. Innovative ways of working including co-applications and creating consortiums for joint programmes are crucial. Women's rights organisations have realised the need to break silos for effective resource mobilisation to tackle the challenge of changing donor priorities.

Women's rights activists continue to demand and defend the independence of civil society organisations so that they are not controlled and manipulated by the state. It has become clear that the involvement of the state is a systematic vehicle meant to suppress instead of elevating the call for women's rights and human rights recognition. Governments often promise funds to NGOs that do not speak up, causing divisions within the movement. For strengthened solidarity and movement building, the civic movement is making efforts to build strong partnerships and collaboration with governments, development partners and the private sector to address violence against women in an integrated manner. More engagements with governments are becoming common and strategic to strengthen relationships and trust.

8

Institutional Safeguards for Civil Society to Prevent Violence on Women and Girls

More innovative strategies must be put in place to ensure that women's civic organisations are free to operate and execute their mandate without fear or intimidation. African states must put in place laws and policies that protect the rights of women activists. More importantly, these must be implemented effectively.

Institutional reforms for civic society by civic society remain a key measure for systematic strengthening of the voice of civil society. Political, economic and cultural landscapes evolve from time to time, and that requires clear approaches to suit the environment without compromising the agenda. Regular internal reflections to shape the agenda remains key for strengthening a unified agenda and clarifying the mandate towards the fight against violence in a strategic way.

Even though there has been sensitisation of institutions on the need to create a safe, enabling and progressive environment for women and girls, there are still areas that require advocacy. These include issues such as social norms, administrative and legal frameworks to constrain women's participation and the state.

Strengthening movements for solidarity is important in fighting violence against women in the continent, regionally and nationally. Stronger movements always have better leverage to engage collectively including escalating the issues to higher levels. Organised movements often make more impact and are better heard. The movements must be organised, well informed and committed.

Most protection and care centres for survivors of violence in Africa are run and operated by women rights' organisations. The majority of governments in Africa do not invest in support and care for survivors. Shelters and protection centres

that exist are often funded by donors and in some cases the private sector. To ensure effective protection of human rights of women and girls, measures must be put in place to protect and defend human rights including the facilitation of litigation as a tool to hold states accountable for human rights violations.

Funding mechanism for violence prevention must be pursued. Civic movements must collaborate and co-fundraise for earmarked activities.

Digital support systems including reporting mechanisms continue to fail survivors of violence especially women activists. Women can be abducted without trace for years. Systems for reporting violence and threats must be put in place and connected to the entire referral system.

More evidence-based research on violence against women in Africa is critical for advocacy and lobbying. As attention continues to increase on this issue, so too does the demand for more and better data to inform and address it. Tracking data over time and monitoring trends can also support those designing and implementing programmes to more effectively evaluate the impact of their programmes. Proper use of data can also empower survivors.

The need to ***build measures for resilience*** remains one of the most important safeguard measures for violence against women and girls. Other measures to eliminate economic, social, cultural, religious or political effects that perpetuate violence against women must be established through targeted community mobilisation for awareness-raising and public education.

Notes

1. https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/civic-space-restrictions-in-africa/
2. https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/civic-space-restrictions-in-africa/
3. https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures
4. ibid.
5. http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cedaw.htm
6. https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa
7. http://www.sadc.int/index/browse/page/465
8. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session25/Documents/A-HRC-25-55_en.doc
9. https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2-Building-resilience-counteracting-the-shrinking-space.pdf
10. https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/kvinna-till-kvinna-suffocating-the-movement-report-eng-2018.pdf
11. ibid.
12. Op. cit.
13. https://www.civicus.org/view/media/Challenges_Faced_by_Women_in_Civil_Society_in_Africa.pdf
14. https://www.civicus.org/view/media/Challenges_Faced_by_Women_in_Civil_Society_in_Africa.pdf
15. ibid.
16. https://kvinnatillkvinna.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/kvinna-till-kvinna-suffocating-the-movement-report-eng-2018.pdf
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African Women and Girls in a Shrinking Civic Space

The civic space has always been shrunk historically for women and other marginalised groups. However, it became even more pronounced after the events of 9/11 in the United States of America, the rise of religious fundamentalism, extreme political intolerance and the growth of the internet among others. These gave rise to stringent legal and administrative measures that further curtailed freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Although women form part of civil society, they are affected differently from the broader civil society and from male human rights activists. Women and girls are affected by patriarchal and traditional values and norms. Women are not given equal access and opportunities in the economy. They are further violently treated, sexually harassed and delegitimised. Their reputations are questioned when they take part in civic spaces. Today, cyberspace offers alternative ways through which women challenge political and traditional systems. The need to invest in technology, innovative financing, and building women's solidarity through women-only spaces; recognising women's work and strengthening their movements is more urgent now than ever before.

Bhekinkosi Moyo is based at the Wits Business School where he serves on the faculty and directs the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Magdalene Madibela is an Independent Gender expert, Pan Africanist and Blogger.

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