

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

#JusticePourMirabelle: The Resurgence of a Transnational Cameroonian Feminist Movement

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For decades, African women have participated in the Black feminist struggle for women’s rights and racial, social, economic, and political justice (Collins 2017; Tamale 2020). In the 1950s, during the fight for independence across the continent, a radical and transnational feminist movement emerged with African women’s protests to “crack the norms of gender and colonial order” (Ndengue 2016) in both urban and rural postcolonial contexts (Falola and Paddock 2011; Mougoué 2019; Nchoji Nkwi 1985; Ndengue 2018). Protests have transnational effects (Johnson-Odim 2009; Terretta 2013). Today, transnationalism relies on social media platforms as sites of calls to action. They constitute alternative public spaces for expression and activism in constrained political environments (Ngono 2018) and platforms that facilitate informal transnational connections. These transnational connections are accompanied by explicit and assertive claims of feminism by a growing number of (young) women.

Recent research by African feminist scholars have analyzed feminist dynamics and African women’s struggle using a variety of methodological approaches. Some of these include collections of interviews and personal accounts of African feminists and retrospectives on the experiences of personal engagement in social movements (Dieng 2021a) and analyses of activists’ use of social media (Mohammed 2022). They all reflect the richness and vivacity of feminist activism on the continent. In the same vein, our essay sheds light on how, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Cameroonian women are reviving social movements and feminist thought in Cameroon and Africa, based on a reflexive return to our encounter with the slogan #JusticePourMirabelle.

Mirabelle Lingom was a young working-class woman who was fraudulently identified by opposition party activists as the companion of a male public figure in a sex tape. After being falsely named, she was abused online, raped, and then died under mysterious circumstances. Mirabelle’s death is a paroxysmal case of

the condition of women in society and politics in Cameroon, highlighting the intersections of gender, classism, and the local political context. Mirabelle's experiences and death catalyzed the resurgence of a radical, intersectional, and transnational feminism in Cameroon. This involves illuminating the "machinations of patriarchy" (McFadden 2016) and the political uses of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) to disrupt the authoritarian, patriarchal, and classist status quo. Pathways to emancipatory resistance are emerging, built on feminist epistemics and praxis (Dieng 2021a; Okech 2020), informal transnational solidarity, and close, nonhierarchical collaboration among feminist activists and scholars living in Cameroon and the diaspora.

#Justiceformirabelle: Patriarchal and Political Machinations

The slogan #JusticePourMirabelle (translated to Justice for Mirabelle) originated within the online Cameroonian community shortly after her death on September 6, 2021. Noteworthy in her case was the involvement of two rival opposition parties, the Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation (Parti Camerounais pour la Réconciliation Nationale, PCRN) and the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Cameroun, MRC).

In June 2021, two sex tape scandals emerged in the public eye. One involved two men in their 40s, Wilfried Etéki and Martin Camus Mimb, and an 18-year-old woman, Malicka Bayemi, who came from a well-connected family. After the tape was released without her consent, Bayemi received a considerable amount of sexual harassment online. In the face of public opinion and pressure from Bayemi's family and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Family (MINPROFF), Etéki confessed to posting the video showing him and Bayemi by mistake, while Mimb denied his implication but eventually admitted being one of the three people involved in the sex tape. Etéki and Mimb were imprisoned for a short time. High-ranking officials such as Jean Dedieu Momo, deputy minister of justice, and Cabral Libii, member of Parliament and president of the opposition political party, PCRN, supported Mimb.

To divert attention away from the first sex tape, a second sex tape was released featuring Paul Chouta, a whistle-blower journalist allegedly close to the MRC, and an unidentifiable companion. Julien Bapes, an ex-boyfriend of Mirabelle and a member of the PCRN, falsely claimed that Lingom was Chouta's lover and a victim of Chouta's abuse with the support of two of his friends of the same party. Bapes allegedly justified to his friends that he chose Mirabelle because she is "fatherless, from a poor family, [and] will never be able to publicly deny these claims or defend herself because she is not very active on social media" (DIAF-TV 2021; Équinoxe TV 2021; Ketch 2021). The PCRN leadership defended Bapes and his conspirators, saying that the men were victims of harassment by MRC partisans. Both scandals show patriarchy and opposition party machinations at work.

Disruption of the Classist Patriarchal Authoritarian Order

In a context in which challenging the social order is risky (Mbongdulo-Wondiech 2020; Morelle and Planel 2018; Ndengue 2020), Mirabelle refused to be silenced.

She demanded justice by publishing a denial of her presence in the released sex tapes and by filing complaints against the perpetrators of the violence she had suffered. By speaking about her experience through the broadcast media, she politicized the treatment of SGBV in Cameroon (DIAF-TV 2021; Équinoxe TV 2021). At the heart of her narrative were the experiences of poor women in society. During her media appearances, Mirabelle challenged fellow citizens and public authorities on their silence and that of institutions and public figures claiming to defend women's rights. She attributed the lack of interest in defending her to her subaltern status, and she declared that if she were the child of a colonel or a minister, her tormentors would have been arrested.

Extending Mirabelle's campaign after her death, a feminist resistance arose to loosen the patriarchal ethos that clamps down on the lives of Cameroonian women, especially those who are most vulnerable. For instance, two Cameroonian SGBV activists, Atsem and Maveun (both pseudonyms), organized a sit-in in front of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Family (MINPROFF). They sought to challenge the patriarchal and femocratic logics of the institutions that hinder the concrete advancement of rights (Mama 1995; McFadden 2016). The intellectual thinking was that both the state and the female elite use women's rights and gender for instrumental purposes: to secure funding from international agencies or to maintain high social status. Atsem and Maveun had to reschedule the sit-in twice because other activists who had been contacted backed out for fear of being incarcerated. The demonstration demanded justice for Mirabelle and denounced the government's hesitation in addressing SGBV in Cameroon, challenging the authorities by chanting slogans such as "Justice pour Mirabelle!," "Stop aux violences faites aux femmes et aux filles camerounaises," and "Nous voulons des lois qui protègent les victimes de violences."¹

The protest was covered on social media and broadcast on TV. The reach of the campaign allowed for connections between Cameroonian feminists in the diaspora and Maveun and Atsem to create a transnational feminist epistemic community in spirit of the radical and transnational African feminist heritage of liberation movements.

The Return of a Radical and Transnational African Feminist Legacy

Mirabelle's death caused a chain reaction in the Cameroonian feminist space that led to the return of a radical and transnational African feminist tradition. By demonstrating in front of MINPROFF, Atsem and Maveun stepped away from the status quo, conceiving of a radical future marked by freedom. Touched by this radical act of love and concern for the safety of the two activists, Cameroonian feminists in the diaspora (primarily in France), including Rose Ndengue (one of the coauthors of this essay), reached out to Atsem and Maveun (the other two coauthors) via social media. Rose and other Cameroonians wanted to determine together how to support them effectively and to develop a common agenda. In keeping with the tradition of Black feminist thought (Collins 2017), our goal was to harness the symbolic, economic, and social resources and privileges we have acquired due to our own positions for locally driven emancipatory collective action.

Like other contemporary African social and feminist movements, social media has allowed feminists to connect, develop strategies of resistance, and relay a critical discourse. Social media helped the activists go beyond awareness raising to concrete action. Feminist activists organized three major events that denounced SGBV in Cameroon, nurturing the “intercontinental black women’s movement” over shared issues of concern (Collins 2017, 360). First, they conducted a digital campaign against SGBV consisting of visuals on various social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp) containing photos and messages from ordinary people, feminist activists, and Cameroonian and other African, or Afro-descendant public figures, such as Afro-feminist filmmaker Amandine Gay and African Women’s Development Fund’s director Françoise Moudouthe. Second, the campaign was accompanied by an online “Petition against violence against women and girls in Cameroon” addressed to the Cameroonian government (Cameroonian Feminist Coordination 2021). Finally, a eulogy was written for Mirabelle, which was distributed on social media and in the Cameroonian press. These actions, rooted in radical feminist struggle, honored Mirabelle’s courage and determination. In September 2022 the main suspect in Mirabelle’s death, Bapes, was arrested.

Mirabelle’s case has many parallels with the analysis of the rape of Adjì Sarr in Senegal (Dieng 2021b). Essentially, women’s bodies constitute political arenas in which power struggles are reproduced. The Mirabelle case highlights how patriarchal and authoritarian violence operate together to reinforce the oppression of women and individuals in Cameroon. However, these injustices activated the expression of a radical emancipatory idea embodied by Mirabelle who has become an icon for a transnational coalition of Cameroonian feminists. Although it has not prompted the government to take assertive measures to address SGBV, the movement around #JusticeForMirabelle nevertheless represents a feminist victory: the spread of a political movement critiquing gender dynamics, and the organization of a transformative resistance through the construction of an epistemic community and a transnational feminist praxis.

Note

1. “Justice for Mirabelle!,” “Stop violence against Cameroonian women and girls,” and “We want laws that protect victims of violence.”

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