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## A Feminist Reading of Hashtag Activism in Ghana

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### Abstract

This article examines Akumaa Mama Zimbi's activism in the Ghanaian social media landscape, specifically Twitter. I argue that while it is imperative to critique her hashtag activism for its complicity with patriarchal ideology in the repression of female sexuality, it is important to contextualize her work within conversations on gender activism and feminisms in Ghana. This article parses out the politics of and tensions in feminist movements on the continent demonstrating how certain activist labels can be depoliticized and used to undo decades of feminist work on the continent. By drawing on my lived experience as an ethnically marginalized Muslim woman born and raised in Ghana who is active in the country's digital (activist) public sphere, I present a critical analysis of the pervasive conversations on gender activism and feminism in Ghana. I employ the conceptual framework of framing to examine the main topics that arise out of Akumaa's #WearYourDrossNow campaign on Ghana Twitter which aims at discouraging young women from engaging in premarital sex. I assert that Akumaa's work is inspired by her personal interpretation of gender activism and is closely tied to religious morality and conservative notions of female sexuality in Ghana.

### Keywords

Culture, Gender activism, Religion, Sexuality, Social media

We should embrace radical strategies in our struggles. We must reject the arguments that Africa is not ready for radical feminism. What such arguments are saying in essence is that we are not ready for transformation.

—Sylvia Tamale

## Introduction

Conversations on feminist activism in Africa have been amplified and made relatively accessible by new media affordances. Even though there have been global conversations on feminism in popular circles and in academia, the feminist movement is still regarded with caution in the public sphere of many African countries. The public sphere is a space (physical or virtual) open to the public where society members gather to engage in discourses about social and political issues. According to Alexey Salikov (2018), "the public sphere can be purposefully built up, informed, networked, and activated, be it for online activities or for engagement in the 'real' world" (88–89). However, gender activism in the public sphere is constrained by social and cultural understandings of gender, power, and what constitutes activism.

Gender studies and gender activism have not experienced as much hostility as feminism has (Bawa 2018; Manuh 2007; Tamale 2006). Feminism in this sociocultural context has historically been represented in popular conversations as an ideology that encourages women to hate men, thus trivializing the core tenets of feminism which aim to dismantle oppressive systems (Mohammed 2018). According to Takyiwaa Manuh (2007), more focus is put on interrogating gender studies in policy and public conversations because it generally aligns with the policies and ideologies of donor and state support. These policies that are supported by donor agencies and state actors "are not aimed at transformation of gender relations and the position of women within African nations" (Manuh 2007, 127). Therefore, the activities and projects of many development organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) pander to the neoliberal ideologies of donor organizations (Fisher 2017). This power dynamic means that NGOs, even those dedicated to addressing issues affecting marginalized women, dance to the tune of donors to the detriment of the very people whose lives they purport to improve (Elbers and Arts 2011; Fisher 2017; Kamstra and Schulpen 2015). This pandering by NGOs—including the ones that address issues affecting marginalized women in Ghana—to donor agencies means that NGOs are forced to actualize projects that mirror the values of gender activism rather than feminism.

Organizations that purport to be dedicated to the welfare of Ghanaian women tend to associate with the gender activist rather than the feminist labels (Manuh 2007). Though gender activism purports to commit to transforming the lives of marginalized women, many of the strategies employed in gender activism only nibble at the problem while ignoring the role that systems play in the oppression of women (Jolaosho 2018). Sylvia Tamale, a feminist activist who experiences discomfort with being identified as a gender activist, finds that gender activism "lacks the 'political punch' that is central to feminism" (2006, 39). Gender activism in Africa has had "the regrettable tendency to lead to apathetic reluctance, comfortable complacency, dangerous diplomacy and even impotence" (Tamale 2006, 39). This article applies Tamale's (2006) observations about gender activism politics to the recent prominent social media campaign #WearYourDrossNow—which literally means "put your underwear back on"—to better understand the ways in which women's voices regarding issues of gender and sexuality impact the contributions of other women to social media and the values they articulate.

Gender activism and feminist work in Ghana as in many African countries have focused on the ways in which customary and traditional practices have been harmful to women and how policies affect the economic well-being of women and poor people (Agyei 2000; Manuh 2007). Most of the work done by NGOs committed to gender issues has focused on addressing gender-based violence, targeting customary practices such as female genital mutilation and widowhood rites, among others, to show how they negatively impact the physical, psychological, and socioeconomic well-being of women in the communities where they operate (Agyei 2000; Gouws 2016; Habasonda 2002; Manuh 2007). Although the issues addressed by gender activism are important, issues such as reproductive rights, class inequality, disability rights, ethnic marginalization, and LGBT+ activism, among others, often get ignored.

Although African feminist work championed by NGOs and government-backed projects aims at transforming the lives of African women through economic, social, and political empowerment, numerous feminist scholars have lamented that, in fact, in Ghana not much actual feminist work has been done to address the systemic oppression that shapes the lived experience of marginalized people (Mohammed 2018; Moore 2016; Tamale 2006). In some cases, technologies have strengthened the popular biases regarding gender roles and female sexuality that oppress women. For example, although social media in various parts of the world has facilitated democracy and created a platform for voices that would otherwise have been marginalized in public discourse (Tucker et al. 2017), it has also been used as a platform to push antifeminist ideologies (Mohammed 2019). In the United States, black feminists have effectively employed Twitter to discuss black feminist thought and activism when white feminism has excluded, ignored, and overlooked the intersectionality of identities and various issues concerning black lives (Brock 2012; Hill 2018; Williams 2015). But the situation is different in Ghana, where limited access prevents many marginalized people from the potential of engaging in digital activism.

It is the case that internet access in many spaces in Ghana is facilitated by several factors including technological literacy, access to smartphones and laptops, and English literacy (Mohammed 2019). This means that people who have limited access to digital media platforms are unable to participate in digital activism, making digital activist spaces accessible to a privileged few. Though women in the upper and middle classes have access to—and in rare cases can influence—how they are represented in traditional media, gender representations are still commonly influenced by the heteropatriarchy and dominant social ideology (Diabah 2019). As a result, and not surprisingly, Ghanaian women engaging in social media (specifically Twitter interventions) also tend to highlight conversations regarding women's accepted roles. These practices, I will argue, demonstrate that representations of normative gender roles intersect with class, religion, and ethnicity, reflecting the limited points of view of those who have access to and post on digital media platforms (Mohammed 2019). It is therefore important to query how identity makes technological access possible in order to then discuss how access could foster/stimulate digital activism (Mohammed 2019).

In the Ghanaian context, as I will show, Twitter is popular among upper-middle- to lower-middle-class, mostly urban users. Limited access to the platform, bred by class inequality, the digital divide, technological literacy, and English language literacy has resulted in the voices of lower income women being generally absent (Mohammed 2019). Twitter thus presents a digital public sphere for the mostly elite and middle class to participate in civic engagement, and importantly to dialog regarding the roles of women; the voices of women marginalized based on ethnicity, class, and religion tend to be absent. Of particular interest to this article is the rise to prominence of certain privileged women's voices who are shifting conversations regarding women's sexuality within the institution of marriage.

In traditional media, gender representation in public discourse is still influenced by the heteropatriarchy and dominant social ideology (Diabah 2019). In contrast, despite the general population's limited access to and/or lack of interest in Twitter as a social networking site, the platform has come to be known as a space where (elite/upper/middle-class, urban) women now intervene in public discourse dialog, offering counterhegemonic contributions (#SpeakUp Barometer: Ghana 2018). The mission of this article is to unravel the complexities enabling this shift in Twitter use by formerly marginalized women (upper/middle-class women) in the public sphere to engage in public discourse around gender roles. To do so, it is imperative to inquire into both how women's positionality, particularly their class status, shapes their use of this social networking site and the ways in which cultural capital both facilitates and shapes their engagement in discourse on social media and specifically on Twitter (Brock 2018; Maragh 2018; Mohammed 2019). The analysis must contextualize social and new media platforms within Ghanaian society, and its values and norms, to understand how these new media practices arise and to evaluate their potential impact.

I will examine how Akuma Mama Zimbi, a public figure and media personality, uses "gender activism" in her online platform (Twitter) to position herself as an ambassador of respectability politics and a gatekeeper of sexual morality as she advocates for sexual pleasure for married women on her radio and TV shows. This article explores how she presents various identities as activism while pushing regressive ideologies of sexuality that reinscribe patriarchal values. Gender activism has tended to be presented in feminist research and popular

conversations in the public sphere as a watered-down version of feminism that does not critically engage key issues of feminist concern such as systemic oppression in many African contexts (Mohammed 2018, Tamale 2006). In the case of Akumaa, I argue that her comments designating respectable sexuality to the institution of marriage have been coopted to undo feminist work and perpetuate tropes of sexual agency that are harmful to women.

It is interesting that in other sociocultural contexts, such as the United States, gender activism is conceptualized to be more inclusive—for example, employing strategies to incorporate LGBT+ activism (Harnois 2017). In analyzing Akumaa's commentary, we see that she designates many forms of women's sexuality as inappropriate. I will argue that this presents evidence that the definition of gender activism has become so malleable in popular conversations that it works in the service of heteropatriarchal and dominant ideologies that, in fact, restrain female sexual agency and bodily autonomy. As argued, numerous Global South feminists posit that media use is not apolitical but is shaped by the society within which it is used (Mohammed 2019; Pillay 2016; Srinivasan 2013). In effect, social conventions, societal norms, and Abrahamic religious values regarding female bodily autonomy and sexual agency are deeply and consistently reflected in Akumaa's social media activities. These values in turn shape the social media engagements of other Ghanaian women on Twitter, reinforcing the patriarchal sociocultural context and values of Ghana within which the conversation is situated. The projection and migration of social norms onto media use is demonstrated in Akumaa's strategic use of social media that I argue is appropriately termed "antifeminist activism."

## Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Through a feminist lens, I employ framing as the conceptual and analytical framework to contextualize the many tweets contributed under the hashtag #WearYourDrossNow. I draw on the feminist work of African theorists such as Takyiwaa Manuh of Ghana and Sylvia Tamale of Uganda to analyze the texts according to the frames presented and the ways in which themes emerge out of the text. Media framing focuses on highlighting the parts of a narrative that reinforce the status quo; this way, narratives are framed and sponsored by powerful groups in a society to maintain societal hierarchies that support the oppression of marginalized groups (Borah 2011; Hardin and Whiteside 2010). According to Dennis Chong and James Druckman (2007), framing is "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (104). Narratives in the public sphere are perpetually framed by power brokers and opinion leaders who present them in ways that influence how the masses receive, engage with, and perceive them (Pan and Kosicki 2005).

Framing has widely been used to examine news discourse and the ways in which normative ideas are promoted in the public sphere (Borah 2011). Here, I expand the utility of this conceptual and analytical tool to examine the way in which narratives of female agency, gender, and sexuality are developed and presented in the digital public sphere. In media framing, specific parts of a story are highlighted while others are downplayed to affect the way audiences receive the story. Through the frames highlighted in Akumaa's hashtag activism, normative ideas on gender and sexuality are reinforced in the public sphere. Through framing, I demonstrate that the themes that emerge from the analysis under the hashtag #WearYourDrossNow reflect patriarchal sociocultural values and perceptions about gender and sexuality in Ghana.

## Methodological Framework

I became interested in the hashtag #WearYourDrossNow when I saw tweets linked to the hashtag on my Twitter timeline around the time that it was started in August 2015. As of September 11, 2016, a total of over 1,794 tweets appeared under the hashtag. The tweets published between August 2015 and September 2016 were gathered and analyzed for this study; tweets were eliminated that used the hashtag but were unrelated to the topic. I also eliminated tweets posted by individuals who added the hashtag to any conversation at all to make their tweets more visible. I manually analyzed and organized the tweets according to the dominant emerging frames. Tweets selected for data analysis embodied the major frames emerging out of the data overall.

In the following, I analyze the ways in which Akumaa Mama Zimbi's #WearYourDrossNow campaign reflects or comments upon dominant ideologies on gender and feminist discourses in Ghana. I then investigate the ways in which Akumaa's gender activism appears to be co-opted to support antifeminist discourse and work. Finally, the article considers, more broadly, how social institutions such as religion and marriage support the suppression of female sexual and bodily autonomy. That is, the article inquires into the ways in which the #WearYourDrossNow hashtag is taken up by purported activists in ways that appear to undo work done by social movements to dismantle oppressive gender role practices. Through a critical framing analysis of tweets under the hashtag #WearYourDrossNow, I argue that the Twitter social media platform has been effectively deployed in support of antifeminist work in the Ghanaian sociocultural context. The article critiques Akumaa's hashtag activism for its complicity in repressing female sexuality, while carefully contextualizing the analysis within practices of gender activism and feminisms distinct to Ghana.

## Akumaa Mama Zimbi's style

The #WearYourDrossNow campaign was started by Joyce Akumaa Dongotey-Padi, popularly known as Akumaa Mama Zimbi. Affectionately called Akumaa or Mama Zimbi, she identifies as a women's rights activist, a sex doctor, and a zimbigenic (from her name Mama Zimbi) in her Twitter bio. While Akumaa's Twitter bio until 2017 listed her as a gender advocate, her Mama Zimbi Foundation website described her as a "Ghanaian women's rights leader, television and radio broadcast journalist, actress and marriage counselor committed to enhancing the status of underprivileged women and children in Ghana and reviving broken marriages" (Mama Zimbi Foundation, n.d.). Per her Twitter bio, website, and self-presentation in the cybersphere and legacy media, Akumaa is not known to claim the feminist label. Akumaa has been a mainstream public figure in Ghana for at least a decade, gaining wide popularity for her performances on TV shows and later her work in radio and TV as a presenter. On Twitter, she commands a following of over 29,000 followers.

"Wear your dross now," which literally means "put your underwear back on," is a hashtag specifically directed at women, as indicated by the gendered word choice of "dross." Social commentary on Ghanaian female sexuality has seen the repeated use of dross in conversations on female sexuality, specifically in popular culture such as hiplife music (a genre widely enjoyed across the country) where women are either sexually objectified, hypersexualized, or slut-shamed (Jabbaar-Gyambrah 2008). Such popular cultural discourses on female sexuality reflect, as argued by Tara Jabbaar-Gyambrah (2008), Ghanaian society's dedication to preserving patriarchal values by promoting the virgin-whore dichotomy, a phenomenon observed throughout various world cultures that restrain women's gender roles to normal or deviant.

This dichotomy is evident in Akumaa's numerous discussions of appropriate sexuality for women. Her commentary draws on what she claims are gender advocacy, gender activist, or women's rights activist strategies to "reconcile" social and cultural values. Notably, as I will show, her work both online and offline presents strategies tailored to what she claims are the needs of her audiences. Crucially, these strategies replicate heteropatriarchal values for female autonomy, promoting respectability guidelines for the female body without questioning the normative systems and social and religious dictates that keep women oppressed. Akumaa's work with her NGO, the Mama Zimbi Foundation, engages in important gender activist work by exposing and confronting issues affecting marginalized elderly widows which enhances women's agency. By contrast, her Twitter hashtag activism, enacted via #WearYourDrossNow (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23WearYourDrossNow>), takes gender activism in a different direction that in fact constrains women's sexual agency.

## Purity, Virginity, and Marriage

To understand the emerging frames in the online #WearYourDrossNow campaign it is important to consider the sociocultural context within which the campaign takes place. In Ghana, religion and culture are forces that drive public discourse on issues of morality. For decades cultural and religious institutions have reflected the ideologies of the elite class, to the extent that these two initially separate and oppositional spheres—addressing gender and sexuality—have been conflated repeatedly. According to Tamale (2014), when faced with a seeming

common enemy (such as feminist activism), institutions with opposing ideas often work together to overcome the common enemy and ensure that they maintain the status quo and do not lose cultural power.

Most Ghanaians believe culture is borne out of custom, tradition, and dominant religions such as Christianity and or Islam. As such, the relationship between religion and popular interpretations of culture in Ghana has become an increasingly collusive one. Reflecting the impact of Christian and Islamic doctrines, conversations on sex and sexuality in the Ghanaian public sphere tend to shame women for their sexual choices (Ababio and Salifu Yendork 2017). Such public shaming is not uncommon in Ghana; in a recent case, I demonstrated the ways in which a male public figure in Ghana publicly slut-shamed a woman who refused his sexual and romantic advances, aware that it would be detrimental to her public image (Mohammed 2019). As well, condemnations of female bodily autonomy and sexual agency are popular in the sermons of prominent "Men of God" such as Bishop Duncan Williams, Counsellor Lutterodt, and Dag Heward-Mills. In 2017, Counsellor Lutterodt publicly shamed women who have children outside of the institution of marriage, calling them "born ones"—a derogatory term used to insult these women (Joy FM 2017).

These same assumptions and values, as I will show, are reflected in the dominant frame that Akumaa Mama Zimbi's #WearYourDrossNow campaign draws upon. While the hashtag campaign is not deployed as news, the cultural impact of the discourses is similar—the frames emerging from the campaign replicate the popular shaming of female sexuality, creating these as normal social expectations. In turn, those norms impact the discourses of gender activist ideologues, showing them to be both malleable and co-optable.

In this discussion, I analyze the activist strategies and women empowerment discourses employed by Akumaa in her social media interventions to shame sexually active young women and "encourage" them to delay or suspend sexual activity until marriage. The analysis seeks to link the manners in which her discourse frames female sexual agency similar to those common among religious institutions and in Ghanaian popular culture. More broadly, I show that the meaning of gender activism has been defined as a watered-down version of feminism that is easily depoliticized by state actors, NGOs, and various stakeholders (Mohammed 2018; Tamale 2006). Together this mirroring of cultural norms and destabilization of the term "gender activism" creates an opening for altered definitions, enabling Akumaa to appropriate the gender activism label in her antifeminist work.

## Preserving Female Purity for Marriage

The dominant frame that emerges in the analysis of the tweets collected from the hashtag campaign is preserving female purity for marriage. This frame reinforces traditional cultural stereotypes and misconceptions about the female body and female sexuality. Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside (2010) have argued that frames that dominate in public conversations over long periods of time tend to be conceived as the norm and accepted widely by the population. This theme is reinforced by toxic traditional ideas of what proper womanhood and girlhood should be. The general notion in many African societies is that a person fully becomes a man or a woman as soon as they are married (Sennott and Mojola 2017); this widely held belief constructs a binary relationship between childhood and adulthood, collapsing the rich spectrum of singlehood. Heterosexual marriage becomes a key defining factor in who becomes an adult more so for women than for men, and single women are then subjected to these normative values as though they are children. Female chastity then becomes a sexual value/virtue by which single women are judged and whereby women who have sex or children before marriage are shamed. This #WearYourDrossNow chastity campaign ultimately polices women's sexuality.

If he really wants to get under your dross, let him marry you first. No means no. Be #Zimbigenic & #WearYourDrossNow (@Akumaa, March 29, 2016)

The #WearYourDrossNow hashtag demonstrates the campaign's adoption of the authoritative tone of a mother, big sister, or aunt figure giving unsolicited advice to younger women. The campaign is deeply gendered in deploying the word "dross" over a more gender-neutral word like "underwear." Importantly, the campaign puts sexual responsibility on women while overlooking men in the context of this traditional, cis-heteronormative reference to sexual relations. The use of the adverb "now" places urgency in the command, reinforcing its authoritativeness. The hashtag demonstrates clearly that this is a chastity campaign directed at young women.

The audience of this tweet are clearly young women, to whom marriage is presented as a condition for sexual intercourse—that is, she must *preserve her body for marriage*. Akumaa routinely presents marriage as the only reason for sexual intercourse to take place—she communicates that sex outside of marriage is immoral and socially unacceptable, and she places the responsibility for abstaining on women. This framing reinscribes conservative notions of sexuality, erasing the potential female agency women attain via sexual choices; it works to restrain the acceptable sexual choices for women. Moreover, the target demographic for Akumaa's campaign reflects mainstream societal notions regarding the age at which one may actively engage in sexual activity. Akumaa's targeting of young women is strategic—she is addressing a vulnerable demographic who tend to reject the feminist label and thus are more likely to be influenced by her campaign (Bawa 2018). According to Sylvia Bawa (2018), generational differences are common in feminist identity politics in Ghana, where older women are more likely than younger women to identify as feminist. This disparity makes young Ghanaian women the perfect target for this antifeminist campaign.

If [yo]u are still on his bed, be #Zimbigenic, close [yo]ur thighs, get up. #WearYourDrossNow and go to [yo]ur hostel. #Medaase (@Akumaa, February 24, 2016)

As evidenced by this tweet, the campaign targets young college women. The word "hostel" specifically points to the audience of Akumaa's campaign because it is common knowledge that tertiary educational-level students live in hostels. In many hostels, the requirement for lodging is that the applicant be a student of the institution(s) the hostels are normally affiliated with. Akumaa's campaign, then, is not only gendered and targeting youth, but it also focuses on women in university and other postsecondary educational institutions (termed tertiary in Ghana). Crucially, this demographic has the most access to Twitter and uses it regularly. Such women in Ghana have been consistently hypersexualized in media representations (in film, TV, music videos, etc.), which often depict them as sexually immoral. They are presumed to be engaging in sexual activity outside of the confines of the institution of marriage. Sexual activity outside of marriage is equated with these media myths of hypersexuality—to effectively position it as a burden that young women must manage in order to stay chaste for marriage.

Keep what is left for the right man who will honour you with marriage. #WearYourDrossNow (@Akumaa, March 18, 2016)

Additionally, Akumaa attempts to present the withholding of sex as a tool of empowerment for young women, adding discourses resembling postfeminism (Dosekun 2015) to normative Ghanaian sexuality discourses. Here, withholding sex until marriage is framed as an empowering and honorable act for women. In postfeminist discourses, sex positivity and female sexual agency are amplified without taking care to critically nuance sexuality within normative cultural conversations on sexuality and sexual agency (Dosekun 2015). For example, in the tweet on honor Akumaa is presenting abstinence as a tool of empowerment that preserves the self-worth of young, single Ghanaian women as opposed to the immorality of sexually active women, thus falsely marginalizing sexually active women as beyond the mainstream.

The campaign hints at a need for moral and sexual "empowerment" for these women, who need to be saved from their hypersexuality, linking empowerment to abstinence. Akumaa employs a combination of empowerment politics and choice feminism politics where young women are entreated to choose chastity to preserve both their worth and the hefty cultural capital associated with their virginity. Ironically, although feminism based on choice often claims to be an apolitical approach that does not judge or critique individual choices (Ferguson 2010), Akumaa's campaign presents only one moral choice: sexual abstinence before marriage. This lack of choice ultimately reinforces societal norms by associating women's abstinence alone with respectability, morality, and honor, and depicting sexual activity as deviant rather than a value that is in fact held by many.

Not only does the #WearYourDrossNow campaign advocate sexual purity for marriage, it frames marriage as a reward to women for maintaining sexual purity. The discussion of sex outside of marriage conveniently leaves men out of the conversation. Importantly, public figures have resisted this framing and this responsibility being saddled on girls alone. For example, writers such as Malaka Grant (2015) have drawn attention to the harmfulness of Akumaa's campaign by presenting counternarratives to the hashtag in their blog posts and other

writings, asserting that Akumaa's stance on female sexual agency is dangerous. As well, the blog from Ghanaian feminist Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah and Malaka Grant, "Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women" (<https://adventuresfrom.com/>), has constantly presented narratives that promote sex positivity, female agency, and female bodily autonomy from a feminist perspective. In co-opting empowerment in the service of abstinence, Akumaa has deployed discourse that seeks to marginalize the common, less-rigid ideas about single women's sexuality held by many young women and progressive social leaders like feminists.

## Chastity and "True" Womanhood as Empowerment

It's not about [yo]ur makeup and the designer wear. It's about being a true woman. #Zimbigenic #WearYourDrossNow #Medaase (@Akumaa, February 15, 2016)

Framing analysis also helps to make visible the connections between power, discourse, and society (Hardin and Whiteside 2010). This connection is evident in the framing of chastity and "true" womanhood. In Akumaa's February 15 tweet, "true" womanhood and femininity are cisheteronormative and are performed through chastity in support of the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). Sexual purity is depicted as a value that women should aspire to and a quality that men should look for in women (Sennott and Mojola 2017). Akumaa binds chastity to women's interests in fashion and makeup, which she decries as worldly and immoral; she asserts that "true" womanhood is achieved and demonstrated by letting go of worldly, material things and practicing chastity before marriage. In this binding, the value of restraint is deployed to naturalize the association of chastity and non-material concerns. This binding seems to reflect the traditional religious and social values that pervade current conversations in the Ghanaian public sphere.

Once again, *this assertion runs counter to the way many young African women understand and assert female agency*. According to Dosekun (2015) many middle-class women in Lagos find consumerism and the performance of hyperfemininity to be empowering. Christie Sennott and Sanyu Mojola have found that "urban women in particular have been noted to seek out relationships with men who can provide the resources they want and/or need and that serve as status symbols" (2017, 782). Many young women in Ghana engage in transactional relationships (dates, sex, and company) with older men in exchange for money and expensive clothing. Oftentimes they are tagged by sexist men on social media sites as "slay queens," meaning women who are obsessed with their physical appearance, spend lavishly, and share the details of their luxurious lives, often supported by so-called sugar daddies on social media (specifically Instagram). Women who engage in these transactional relationships are chastised by Akumaa for "exchanging" their chastity for gifts from older men. These comments echo and reinforce that shaming practice, encouraging modesty and (condemning) young women who exchange sex, company, and dates for gifts. Ultimately, by either retweeting these comments or openly supporting them in her own tweeted responses, Akumaa bolsters and encourages the public ridiculing of these young women, normalizing the dynamic (espoused in her campaign) that infantilizes these young women and condemns and judges them for their sexual choices.

Overall the frame constructs female responsibility as agency conceptualized in a conservative, postfeminist form of empowerment. Chastity, framed as a choice that a woman makes on her own, is cast as her ability to resist her sexual desires and maintain abstinence until marriage. Choice is presented within a narrow frame of respectability where a young woman is presented with no other option to maintain her integrity than to suspend sexual activity until marriage. As such, this choice is not agency but in fact is a postfeminist practice that demonstrates her ability for self-restraint; this practice normalizes the woman as having sole responsibility for managing heterosexual dynamics. In so doing, it maintains restrained traditional, gender roles for women and for men.

## The Need for a Feminism with a Capital F

This essay demonstrates that just as online social media platforms can be used to facilitate activism and organizing (Srinivasan 2013), they can be used to reinscribe dominant gender ideologies and promote harmful tropes that restrain female sexual agency. Therefore, new media and their affordances are not necessarily



revolutionary, but the way they are used for liberatory politics can make them revolutionary (Brock 2018; Mohammed 2019). Akumaa uses gender activism and women's rights activism to support her antifeminist sexual repression campaign in a manner that hinges women's agency on traditional standards of morality and conservative social and religious values.

The #WearYourDrossNow campaign threatens the gains of decades of feminist work done in Ghana that has achieved an increase in educational access for girls and is slowly increasing the participation of women in politics. Akumaa's antifeminist tweets on female sexuality demonstrate a form of gender activism, gender advocacy, and women's rights that is co-opted by what Adwoa Asante (@obaa\_boni [https://twitter.com/obaa\_boni], a popular Ghanaian feminist activist on Twitter) calls "patriarchal princesses," where elite/upper/middle-class women (such as Akumaa) benefit from the patriarchy and therefore work toward maintaining the gender role status quo (Obaaboni 2015). Gender activism is a practice repackaged by Akumaa and utilized as a tool of empowerment to encourage women to view their bodies as vessels preserved for the consumption of men in the traditional venue of marriage. This phenomenon demonstrates that, now more than ever, African feminist activism needs to pay attention to dismantling oppressive systems by having long overdue conversations on the ways in which activism has been watered down and put in the service of oppressive patriarchal systems and their representatives, who laud regressive gender values (Mohammed 2018; Tamale 2014; Tamale 2006).

This antifeminist gender activism, as seen in Akumaa's social media practice, suggests that there is a need for a "feminism with a capital F" to intervene (Tamale 2006, 39). Beyond women's empowerment discourses, "attempts to liberate women must address the crucial issue of sexuality" (Tamale 2006, 40). While sexual politics are usually positioned as secondary to other issues in gender activism, it is imperative to highlight how issues of female bodily autonomy and sexuality in African feminist movements are often situated within normative cultural and religious values and practices. Hopefully, Nana Darkoa Sakyiamah's "Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women" is driving conversations on sex positivity and female bodily autonomy in these digital spaces. While the legacy media that are most accessible to the Ghanaian populace reinscribe normative ideas of gender and sexuality, conversations in digital spaces among young African feminists often resist the status quo by asserting women's bodily autonomy and providing counternarratives to the dominant regressive discourses as demonstrated by Akumaa.

Akumaa's gender activist strategies illustrate the limitations of choice feminism. According to Micheale Ferguson,

Choice feminism is motivated by a fear of politics. It arises in response to three common criticisms of feminism: that feminism is too radical, too exclusionary, and too judgmental. In response, choice feminism offers a worldview that does not challenge the status quo, that promises to include all women regardless of their choices, and that abstains from judgment altogether. (2010, 247)

While at first glance, Akumaa might appear to support choice feminism, it is not the case as that approach claims to be apolitical and to not judge or critique individual choices (Ferguson 2010). Akumaa claims to be guiding young women to make better sexual choices, but the #WearYourDrossNow campaign indicates otherwise, judging young women for being sexually active, hinging their self-worth on abstinence, and, as argued, bolstering powerful regressive forces that place moral responsibility in sexual relations on women alone and that encourage female shaming. Moreover, Akumaa's writings are dangerous and sexist in assuming that the freedom to choose to have sex is guaranteed and universal, and therefore that challenging women to abstain from sex is "radical." This assumption demonstrates an ignorance of the limited options and violent realities that many Ghanaian women face. Such an awareness is crucial to understanding the choices women make to assert bodily autonomy, to exchange sex for currency, and to insist on having choice over how they use their bodies.

As activists invested in female agency and bodily autonomy, we must ourselves enact radical practices in response. To ensure accountability, radical transformation, and the growth of our feminist activist work, we must exercise judgment and present critique in order to, as Ferguson (2010) asserts, grow feminist politics. Judgment here should take the form of presenting dissenting perspectives (Pillay 2016) as accomplished by Malaka Grant

and @obaa\_boni (cited earlier) to counter the misappropriation of activism in antiliberatory projects like Akumaa's campaign.

When contextualized within conversations on feminist activism in Africa, the #WearYourDrossNow antifeminist campaign demonstrates that gender activism is still more accepted than feminism (Bawa 2018; Mohammed 2018; Tamale 2006). That the campaign has thrived for years and garnered support among young women for many reasons means there is more work to be done with regards to supporting enhanced dialogue regarding what constitutes female sexual agency. First, as Bawa (2018) has observed, older women are more likely than younger women to adopt feminist praxis due to various factors, including their married status and former involvement in liberation movements such as the fight for Ghana's independence. Older women thus tend to possess an intricate understanding of feminist politics, whereas many younger women are more hesitant to identify as feminist due to their single status and limited understanding of feminist politics, among other reasons. (Bawa 2018).

Finally, the campaign has thrived online due to the disproportionately youthful makeup of Twitter spaces in Ghana. Older women have tended to not be part of the online debates regarding female sexuality and virtue. As such, beyond reexamining feminist education in Ghana, it is important to dismantle the hierarchies in Ghanaian feminist movements that make them largely inaccessible to the masses and present them as exclusionary spaces (Bawa 2018). Mainstreaming platforms such as the "Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women" and "Ghana Feminism" (<https://ghanafeminism.com>) and expanding feminist education on reproductive rights activism and sexual autonomy among other issues are good places to start to create dialogue on these issues.

Reflecting on the findings of this article, I contend that gender-based activism in Ghana needs a radical transformation. Activist strategies must focus on dismantling oppressive systems rather than on maintaining the status quo that preserves Abrahamic religious values of female sexuality; if we are to reflect the practices and opinions of all women in Ghana, we must dialogue with the input of our feminist ancestors and work toward achieving actual choice for all women. The employment of radical feminist strategies will come at the price of ostracism from mainstream society, where many hesitate to identify as feminist for fear of being excluded from their social and religious circles that have deeply patriarchal commitments in Ghanaian culture (Mohammed 2019). To fortify us against this ostracism, it is important for African feminists to build supportive communities online and offline (in the form of group chats, group meetings, and community organizing groups) to enable us to continue dismantling systems built and supported by the heteropatriarchy (Tamale 2006) that replicate female oppression and work to prevent women from asserting autonomy over their bodies.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that prominent public figures like Akumaa send messages to women that urge them to *preserve their bodies for marriage*, and the subtheme *pursue chastity and true womanhood as empowerment*. These proscriptions uphold the status quo, suggesting dominant social and religious ideologies should rule women's bodies and condemn women's autonomy over their sexuality, including their representations in popular advertising, music videos, and other media. The gender and sexuality discourse promoted by Akumaa's #WearYourDrossNow is representative of the perspectives of a large and powerful portion of the Ghanaian populace on sex, marriage, and sexuality. Akumaa's campaign is unidimensional, in that it focuses on interpersonal relations in sexuality and does not necessarily engage with systems of oppression such as the patriarchy. Though her campaign may be dismissed as irrelevant and ineffective because it is led and run by one woman, its reach to a large following on Twitter and to large audiences on radio and television has contributed to its entrenching normative values on sexuality. In her TV program, Akumaa's open discussions of sex and sexuality for married women reinforce the perspective that sexuality is normal and healthy—but is reserved for married women alone. These discourses, spread across media spheres, strengthen patriarchal institutions by reinforcing normative, proscriptive, and regressive notions of female sexual agency. These, crucially, are dictated by and reify the authority of patriarchal institutions and cultural practices, creating a virtuous cycle that young women without choices or those who wish to live differently must consistently contest.

It is unclear to what extent Akumaa's campaign has affected the young Ghanaian women targeted by the project. Because "social media alone cannot carry and implement the entire political process of change" (Kasana 2014,

241), it is imperative to challenge these harmful notions on sexuality both discursively (as discussed) and systemically through policy implementation that supports female sexual agency and bodily autonomy across social institutions—education, health, family, media, religion—to bring about radical transformation across private and public spheres.

There is much more research to be done. To begin, future research should explore the ways in which Akumaa connects her online antisex campaign to her work on radio and TV about female sexuality and sexual agency. It should also examine the ways in which her target audiences process and engage with campaigns like #WearYourDrossNow. Finally, further studies should explore the relationship between precolonial notions of sex and sexuality to contemporary discourses and the subversive strategies that can be/are employed to challenge the repression of female sexual agency in Ghanaian communities.

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