



The African Women's
Development and
Communication Network

Rethinking & Regrounding SRHR:

**A Conversation
between
Hope Chigudu
& Rudo Chigudu**





Introduction

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) is a pan- African, feminist, and membership-based network based in Nairobi with over 800 members across 49 African countries. FEMNET exists to facilitate and coordinate the sharing of experiences, ideas, information, and strategies for human rights promotion among African women's organizations through networking, communication, capacity-building and advocacy at the regional and international levels. Since its inception in 1988, FEMNET has strategically positioned herself as a convenor, organizer, and facilitator on dialogues around critical issues including women's involvement in governance and leadership, promoting women's economic justice, advocating for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, ending gender-based violence and harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation and child marriage) and strengthening the women's movement in Africa. FEMNET continues to use storytelling as a powerful tool for reclaiming power, agency, and voice around women's rights. FEMNET deeply appreciates Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu for this candid conversation that takes a deep dive analysis to unpack sexual and reproductive health and rights. We believe this inspiring and thought-provoking conversation will influence SRHR policy and practice in Africa.

In sisterhood and solidarity

Memory Kachambwa

Executive Director, FEMNET




SRHR Culture, Tradition & The Private Sphere

Hope: Why do you call yourself a V Warrior? If you're, why do you selectively edit your humanity, your Africanness? Why are you stigmatising and tabooing sexuality as if our great and great and great ancestors did not talk about sexual pleasure openly? As if women did not take joy in loving their bodies? Why is it that many activists such as you, are comfortable with reproductive health but shy away from issues related to bodily integrity, pleasure, autonomy and gender identity? What is criminal about having all parts of the body singing and dancing the African way? Isn't happiness a human right?

Rudo: But Hope, are you drunk? What demon has possessed you? Since when did sexual organs sing? Let us talk about reproductive health and leave out rights. After all this is less vulgar.


Hope: As a feminist, why are you comfortable with all the regional protocols and international instruments and laws, rules, restrictions, regulations and prohibitions on how, where and with whom we "do" sexuality but are afraid to discuss sex matters? All these instruments would be great if they were built on what women know, want and don't want. However, sometimes they are patronising, controlling and quite often even sexist. In the process, these restrictions step on women's to privacy, autonomy, integrity and dignity. Examples of such laws abound, including those on prostitution, homosexuality, marital rape, pornography and abortion. If at least there was a political commitment to the protocol and agendas I would forgive you. But there isn't.

Rudo: I won't discuss sex matters! There must be issues and conversations that should be confined to the private domain, parts of the body that must dance quietly without showing and telling the whole world that they are dancing. Such display causes



discomfort and suspicion regarding SRHR activism. If there are people who are too shy to say sex and call it hex (actually whisper), how can they talk about having the lower part of the body dancing violently?

I will also have you understand that Africans recognise heterosexuality. This is a marriage between a penis and a vagina.





Activism & Context

Hope: African women have always been very clear about the right to sexual pleasure and rights. They do not call sex, HEX. It's you who is inhibited by your education, religion, pre-colonial laws, un-rooted cultural beliefs, and class. You are also boxed in exclusively binary and heteronormative. You categorize people in absolute terms as either heterosexual male or heterosexual female. Where is diversity in the way you look at the world?

Rudo: But Hope...


Hope: Don't Hope me. You are an activist and you are scared of a topic that unleashes joy and pleasure in a woman. Where is your activism? Can you imagine a doctor who is scared of blood? How come religious preachers are not afraid to preach? Some preach under trees, others on the street under a scorching sun ... that is the power of conviction. Are you convinced about this work of activism? You are free to talk about mutilation, access to hospitals, family planning but not abortion or sexual pleasure? Not about a woman's rights to control her body? Are you in the right sector?

Rudo: But Hope

Hope: What? Women have always discussed their sexual health openly and that is how they started sharing healing herbs and strategies. Some know how to get rid of unwanted pregnancies and also know how to make themselves happy sexually. Let me also remind you that our ancestors did not mince their words when it came to sexuality. They had their own sexuality teachers, witches (read wise women), diviners etc. All we need as activists is to take a hard look at ourselves and ask whose message we are disseminating. If you can't engage with contested SRHR issues of erotic desire and pleasure, why don't you go and grow potatoes?

Rudo: If we take the route you are advocating we are bound to be arrested?

Hope: How can we progress if we fear being arrested and if we also fear discussing contested issues such as abortions,



LGBTIQ and sex-work from an African perspective? What is bodily integrity; dignity, right to desire, pleasure, and of course, and right to love? Let us think about language too, you say talking about sexuality is obscene, how do you define obscene? Are you really fighting for human rights or fighting for rights without humans?


Let me remind you that Africa is big. It has also changed since colonialism but I swear in my culture, every part of the body is called by its biological name and whatever act is performed by any part of the body is talked about openly. In Uganda, the traditional institution of *Ssenga* (*auntie*) among the Baganda, for instance, plays a significant role in promoting the right to sexual knowledge and pleasure. Other cultures too have their own ways of doing so. This is not to say that culture is always right, there are elements of it that must be done away with. Female genital mutilation is one of them. However, don't throw out the baby with bath water. Women know a lot. For example, they know how to get rid of unwanted pregnancies (some of them do) and also know how to make themselves happy sexually.

Rudo: But Hope, you are too radical for our movement

Hope: And what are you? A dangerous fundamentalist who uses religion to suffocate the movement? I fear that you tend to join dangerous powerful platforms to promote the heteronormative ideal and other deadly weapons against women, such as anti-abortion campaigns. How do you reconcile the two worlds of fundamentalisms and feminism?

Authentic activism has to do with how you pull yourself out of the box of bureaucratic institutions and see things the way the women you represent see them. Why do you allow the UN to define what is right and wrong for African women? You need to question what you have taken for granted for a long time and see the world differently. Disrupting the status quo can be oxygen rich. It keeps you breathing and not any kind of breathing, but liberating breathe.

Rudo: You have never been balanced but this time you have gone overboard.



Hope: The world will never be changed by balanced people. I don't want to be balanced; crackedness enables me to be a radical feminist.

But then Rudo, do you believe you are balanced simply because you are paraded from one meeting to the other? You are in every SRHR conference and whose views do you represent in those meetings? Have you ever taken a group of ordinary women to those meetings and created space for them to share their views?


What they want to see change and what they want to retain? How can you make assumptions?

Rudo: Now Hope, you are getting confused. Don't you care about traditional family values and morality?

Hope: I am not confused. Look at your eyes; it's you who squints because of erotic discussion. You are a feminist at least that is what you say? If so then use methods that enable you talk to the women and solicit their views. Use feminist popular educators who recognize that people are energized and transformed by experiences that tap into how they feel, think and move and that this holistic approach reinforces their multiple forms of intelligence and ability to enjoy and contribute to society. Remember that patriarchy operates to discredit our ideas and emotions, denigrating how we view our own mental capacities, relationships, feelings, and bodies. So talk to women. Go where they are. You represent women; use their own understanding of SRHR, not your own understanding. You will have real authentic conversation, one that is not garnished with a language that they don't even understand.

Rudo: So you want us to engage in conversations with women on SRHR?

Hope: Why not? We need to affirm women's own knowledge and generate the hope, joy and spirit of wholeness that strengthens their sense of integrity, community and possibility. We all need to benefit from their many personal and collective sources of knowledge regarding SRHR and other areas. This



is one of the reasons why songs, drawing, poetry, skits, and personal sharing are vital. If you listen to some of the songs, proverbs and jokes women share, you will understand SRHR from their perspective. Then with that information, it is critical that the forms of knowing, learning and connecting are combined with analysis, strategizing and organizing. By beginning a learning process that affirms personal and community knowledge and concerns, you can give women confidence in their creative ability to demand to change some aspects of SRHR that do not work for them. They will also be opened to new ideas, ways of working together; creating an SRHR movement that makes things happen.


Rudo: All this seems to be ok but you forget one thing Hope. Bedroom conversations should never be made public, no, no, not the way you want it to be.

Hope: How about bedroom violence? Should it be spoken about? How about sexual abuse from acquaintances, family members, trusted individuals and from strangers alike which might also happen in bedrooms?

A culture of silence allows harmful SHRH discriminatory norms and practices to fester. Some of us are trying to slowly remove lids that have been used to cover SRHR pots but here you are, pushing the lids back.

Rudo: I am putting back the lids to protect us because society is not ready. Remember the crazy women who initiated vagina monologue in Uganda, what happened? They were almost arrested.

Hope: What happened was liberation; they were pioneers. They loosened our tongues and gave us permission to call the vagina by its real surname and not *privates* or *down there*. You are young, you are the future, and yet you have a very dangerous vision around a future society. My great grandmother, Sarah, was more progressive than you. She discussed issues of sexuality and everything that falls in the framework of SRHR without batting



an eye lash. She with her friends, talked about sexual pleasure openly. They knew what herbs to use, what songs to dance, how to make themselves happy sexually with or without men.

Rudo: No wonder, you are as crazy as Sarah your grandmother. Hope, I doubt that you are even religious. Are you?

Hope: Religious? None of your business, you fight for your soul, and I'll fight for mine. For now, let us stick to the worldly kingdom. How do you go to heaven when you have not even explored and used your body fully, each part of the body including those vital parts that people call private? Who created pleasure, joy, dignity...?


Rudo: Hope is the world ready for you radicalism

Hope: Young activist, when will the world ever announce that it's ready? In fact these days it's not about readiness but backlash; are we are supposed to keep quiet and hope it will pass while we see discrimination everywhere? Haven't you witnessed unfair treatment of people based on their sexual orientation, which leads to dehumanization, abuse and denial of human rights? Is that acceptable, is that religious? The current moment is ripe for SHRH activists, policy makers and scholars to collectively discuss where they get their information from. To think about SRHR from an African perspective. It is also time for us to re-examine our strategies and approaches and rejuvenate our conceptual tool kits as needed but based on proper research and not just what we want but what women want. We need to do this to remain relevant in the fight for SRHR and to the task of building the next generation of institutional change scholars and activists of which you re both. We are operating in an increasingly unequal world challenged by big man politics, religious fundamentalism, toxic masculinity and denial of sex and sexuality. Let us act now.

Rudo: You are talking as if change will happen tomorrow if we approach SRHR from an African perspective or woman centred perspective.

*Hope
Chigudu*



The image features a complex abstract graphic design. On the left side, there is a vertical column of various shapes including triangles, circles, and irregular polygons in shades of red and orange. The bottom half of the image is dominated by a large, intricate pattern of overlapping geometric shapes. This pattern includes a prominent purple section with white outlines, orange sections with white outlines, and red sections with white outlines. The shapes are layered and interlocking, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is bold and modern, with a focus on primary and secondary colors and their combinations.

Hope: Change will not happen if you and many like you, continue on this **ambiguous, diluted, apolitical, safe route; no opinion, no rocking the boat, an activist who really does not have a personality.** For change to happen, we need to tactically re-wire institutional structures – that might help in breaking down silos and fault lines that are limiting cross—social movement mobilization. But then we also need to think about how to interrogate our language so that we avoid setting up an us-(SHRH activists versus-them (other human rights activists) dynamic.

Social Movements

Rudo: Why do you always complicate things that are really quite simple? You are trying to intimidate me on purpose so that I stop the conversation but I won't. I'll continue asking. What are social movements?

Hope: You are shameless, no one can intimidate you but you are right, we need to understand what social movements are. We sometimes mistake our organisations as social movements or we think that everyone who says social movement will enter the kingdom of SRHR and other movements' heaven.

There are many definitions, but actually you are an activist scholar, and I should ask you but I know you will fear saying the word sex, and will call it hex so I won't ask. Let me use the definition given to us by our Indian sister Srilatha. Social movements are forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands. They are comprised of 'an organised set of constituents pursuing a common political agenda of change through collective action'¹.


She also reminds us that social movements are not inherently progressive. For example, religious fundamentalisms has been rooted in and propagated by social movements.

Rudo: I am not done; unpack the features of social movements.

Hope: You ask me questions but then start fidgeting with your phone, you are both present and absent, both in the moment and out of the moment. Stay present and focused.

Listen; social movement politics are formed from the premise that the world is socially constructed and that it is both possible and necessary to change it to achieve our movement's vision of a just society and of power relations within it. The justifications for what

¹ Adapted from Battiwala 2012: 3



needs to change (political agenda) and why (political analysis), who should change them (leadership, membership and representation) and how (actions and strategies) are the core questions of our and other movements. It is these elements that distinguish one movement from another. I want you to understand that the existence of social movements and the visions and actions that they present are inherently political in that they aim to challenge and change systems of power. So don't look at me like that. We are talking politics here.

Rudo: My phone is ringing but you intimidate me, I fear responding, so continue

Hope: Respecting other peoples' time is a huge part of being an activist in a progressive movement. So listen, reflecting on internalised notions of masculinity and femininity – is a critical component of interrogating the deep structure of movements and organisations. Subtle, unquestioned expressions of these, often oppressive to women and in some cases men and others, are usually manifested there, and must be questioned as must be the deep structure that Gender at Work talks about².

2 Analytical Framework – Gender at Work genderatwork.org/analytical-framework



Relationship Between Social Movements & Organisations

Rudo: How do social movements work with people's organisations such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, religious organisations, trade unions, political parties, academic centres and more than anything else, women's CBOs? And how do you plan to advance this work without setting Africa on fire?


Hope: It is on account of the question you have raised that we do the work of politicisation, to make these institutions understand the importance of SRHR and especially its political nature. Remember we need diverse voices. In a progressive movement, whatever any of us brings enables a bringing from others rather than curtailing it.

We are working for our own satisfaction, but others will occupy this activist work that we are creating. Both perspectives need to exist in our minds all the time. And hence we need other voices, it can't be ours alone.

Rudo: Going back to the question of social movements; why are they relevant? Why can't I continue doing SRHR movement work in the safety of my own organisations? When we are in our organisations, we move. There is progress but these movements.... Movements are sites of struggle!

Hope: You want to stay hidden in your little NGO corner so that you can pretend that when you move to go to the bathroom you are building a movement?

Listen, you promote human rights. In order for any action or intervention around rights, democracy and equality to be successful, it must include and value gender equality, by implication SRHR, as part of its analysis and methodology for change. Remember what I said at the beginning, SRHR is contextual. Integrating SRHR perspectives and issues is not just about 'thinking about' men and gender minorities but, rather,



considering what SRHR politics provide in terms of alternative ways of being, seeing and doing that in themselves serve to transform patriarchal power relations and create a happier society. This is huge work. It's a mountain; it can't be moved by a small spoon called your little organisation. We need collective power to move it.


Rudo: Who should lead this SRHR movement that you're obsessed with?

Hope: There is no doubt that when we talk about SRHR issues the most affected are girls and women. Hence the majority of historical and contemporary activism on SRHR has been led by feminists, and progressive women's movements which are united around a common cause of challenging gender inequalities and injustices in society, although there is diversity in perspectives on this, including from the vantage points of class, ability, age and sexual orientation. However, this does not mean that others should not promote SRHR, after all who is not affected. Even Priests are.

Rudo: How do our males feature in this movement?

Hope: All humans, including your males, should contribute one way or the other. After all not all people neatly fit into the categories of "man" or "woman," or "male" or "female." For example, some people have a gender that blends elements of being a man or a woman, or a gender that is different than either male or female. Others don't identify with any gender and for others gender changes over time. People whose gender is not male or female use many different terms to describe themselves, with **non-binary** being one of the most common. Other terms include gender queer, **agender**, **bigender**, and more. None of these terms mean exactly the same thing – but all speak to an experience of gender that is not simply male or female³. To be supportive and respectful of non-binary people, even if you have just started to learn about them is not hard.

³ [Understanding Non-Binary People: How to Be Respectful and...](https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding)
transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding



Having said this, male gender equality activists are on the increase. Some have developed theoretical and practical insights into the ways patriarchal power affects men and boys, questioning definitions of masculinity, including social norms, expectations and behaviours around men's labour, relationships in the family, sexuality, violence and aggression; and considering how men can relate to women in more egalitarian ways. Some male led organisations are as brave as to go a step further and engage with issues of abortion, same sex relationships, sex-work and other contested issues. There are a few mixed-gender movements that are working on issues of SRHR, although women tend to dominate such organisation.

*Rudo
V Warrior
Chigudu*



SRHR Movement & Other Movements

Rudo: And are all women activists progressive?

Hope: You talk too much, why do you ask these unsafe questions? The presence of women in a movement does not necessarily mean that they are progressive.

Rudo: Fear or lack of conviction? Discuss!

Hope: I should ask you that question seeing as you fear identifying with contested issues. Suffice to say that there are issues related to sex, sexuality, gender, culture, tradition and what you called the private sphere that some women are still struggling with.




Challenges

Rudo: Share with me some of the key challenges that advocates of SRHR are facing?

Hope: This is supposed to be a conversation but you are interviewing me. The world, in particular the African continent, is crystallising in a way that is hostile to SRHR. But then in any case, advocates for SRHR usually face particular challenges around making issues related to sexuality visible and recognised. Ideas about tradition, culture and religion can be used and are used to marginalise and silence those who speak up about power, and sex in areas such as the family and on topics such as abortion, making it extremely difficult for such ideas to become accepted and common topics in movement agendas and discussions. So there!

Rudo: Remember most of the elements related to SRHR threaten solidarities with other constituencies. Even within women's and feminist movements, there are disagreements and hierarchies, particularly around recognising and acknowledging women's diverse identities. This inhibits the potential of social justice movements to build strong, progressive alliances. So if you think that alliances and solidarities are easy, you are joking.

Hope: Did I imply that building alliances is easy? I know that even when SRHR movements succeed in attracting members, building leadership and encouraging thinking about what SRHRs mean in the context of their agendas, challenges arise in keeping up momentum. It is often difficult to sustain progress and to maintain an intersectional approach or to build on initial achievements to ensure that SHRH rights and gender justice



remain a constant area of focus. Thinking about all this makes me tired. But let me finish. Movements are created and given meaning by their members. Without members, there would be no movement, although there is no standard rule regarding the minimum number of people or organisations required for an active constituency to be considered a movement rather than a collection of individuals even if they are important in giving shape to a movement. For example, women's and feminist movements across the world have been instigated, populated and given direction and inspiration by individual actors including community activists, theorists and academics, artists, individual service providers and public figures. Recognising the role of individuals in movements is useful when considering strategies for integrating SRHR perspectives into progressive social movement practices.






Strategies

Rudo: Can prayer be used as a tool and strategy for a social movement?

Hope: You are asking me as if I have ever built a heavenly movement. Who am I to tell you what tools you should use with your God? I'll confine myself to earthly tools in secular organisations. Social movements use a range of tactics and strategies for their activism. In their practice, movements create activist and organising cultures, typically performing the emancipatory power relations and forms of relationship and expression that they seek to instigate in the broader world. Some of the tools include popular education, consciousness raising, public art such as muralism and community theatre, protest marches, models of consensus-based decision-making, and the creation of new languages and names. Then there is technology. What makes newer ICTs interesting in the context of social movements is the potential opened up to not only use communication tools for mobilising, but also for popular engagement in developing and/or appropriating new communication platforms for activist use. But remember that technologies are framed by power relations. As with all realms of social interaction, access to and use of technologies is gendered. And of course we have seen social media being turned into a tool of violence against women.

Rudo: How much energy should be invested in engaging the State and changing the terms of its relationships with its citizens, including laws, policies and the provision of basic needs considered as the 'enabling conditions' for SRHR. Is the battle with the state law or with patriarchy?

Another question how is it that it's often difficult for movements working on different issues of SRHR to work together? For example, you find one movement working on issues of abortion and another on access to maternal care, another working on challenging stigma, discrimination, attitudes and another on laws and policies? .



Hope: Our states are patriarchal. You know that.

There are examples of situations where different movements have been brought closer together through the development of common strategies. In East Africa, for example, the emerging sex-worker and LGBTI movements wanted to build support for their struggles by building a critical mass of supporters. They were both facing similar challenges around police raids, weak organisations and leadership crises. They built their strength and resilience by engaging in joint influencing and awareness work and participating in coalitions and alliances – for example, to fight against repressive legislation on homosexuality (Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe with Chigudu 2013). You can read the case if you are interested.


Movement & Money

Rudo: So from what I know of liberation movements, they got external support but they also organised resources from their communities. Religious organisations do that as well but as far as I can see, if the external funders stopped funding, the SRHR movement would die

Hope: Religious institutions promise heaven. We don't have an SRHR heaven in that sense. Our constituency does not give money with the hope of going to heaven. Our SRHR movement, like other movements, has a complicated relationship with financial resources. The movement is not usually centrally resourced, and movement participation is often unpaid, although particular campaigns, strategies or organisations linked to the movements may be resourced or situated in organisations that are. To a large extent we do put in resources which remain invisible; it might not be money but do you think that working almost 22 hours a day, looking for physical spaces to meet people, providing intellectual resources, accessing media and materials for gatherings, engaging in actions such as public protests is not a lot of contribution? Do you know how much I spend on coffee each day, because of this work? Do you know how my health is compromised?

I also don't understand why we separate the world of funders from that of activists. Funders don't live in space. They live with us on planet earth, they want freedom of choice, bodily integrity and the right to do whatever they want with their bodies. So it's not charity work, they are stakeholders too. They do whatever they are good at and we do what we are good at.

Rudo: You can argue! Does not institutional funding place limitations on strategies used by organisations within social movements?

The background of the page is a complex, abstract geometric pattern. It features various shapes such as triangles, rectangles, and irregular polygons, some of which are filled with solid colors (purple, brown, red) while others are white with colored outlines. The pattern is dense and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The colors used are primarily earthy tones: deep purple, burnt orange, and dark red, set against a white background.

Hope: Yes, there are many contradiction but we can't stop working because of them. You see a progressive movement is a place where contradiction must be held and embraced; it must hold a free space and allow all to share their views. In the SRHR movement we are constantly emerging.

Backlash

Rudo: I want to go back to backlash...

Hope: Oh please, you go there alone! Is backlash always a sign of failure? Success can bring backlash, and new forms of injustice, marginalisation and inequality can emerge as mainstream power takes on new forms or extends its reach in new domains. So yes, it's discouraging but there will never be success without backlash. I do admit there is also backlash within. Have you seen extreme Christian fundamentalism in our secular spaces?

Rudo: Thanks for responding to my questions. I love the fact that we are beginning to talk about SRHR from an African perspective, looking at a whole woman and not just parts of her. May we continue to research more and more about the meaning of this work given extreme diversity of the continent?

Hope: I challenge you to do just that...



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