The Backlash Against African Women

By SISONKE MSIMANG
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Credit Ping Zhu

JOHANNESBURG — A FEW weeks ago, as I was leaving my office, I stopped at a traffic light and watched a young woman cross the street in front of me. She wore a pair of jean shorts cut fashionably high, and I could see the crease of her left buttock extend each time she took a step. She wouldn't have been out of place in London or New York or Tokyo. Except that this was Johannesburg, the biggest city in a country known for its high levels of violence against women. As I pulled away, I worried that she might be assaulted.

I'm not suggesting that she was inviting trouble. I was anxious because she was walking near the spot where a young woman in a miniskirt had been attacked by a crowd of men a few years earlier. I'd also just watched footage of a crowd attacking and stripping a miniskirt-clad woman in Nairobi just days after the release of the viral video of a woman in New York being catcalled. A few weeks later, another video surfaced in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare. A girl in a short dress was dragged from a minibus onto the street, where an angry crowd of men stripped her naked.

Public strippings represent the front lines of a cultural war against women's advancements in traditionally conservative but rapidly urbanizing societies.

They aren't really about what women are wearing. They are much more about where women are going.

And many African women are going places quickly. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala became the first female finance minister in Nigeria; Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is one of a handful of elected female heads of state in the world. Lupita Nyong'o's Oscar win and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literary successes have brought attention to the artistic triumphs of a younger generation of women.

Nowhere has progress been more remarkable than in Africa's legislatures. Africans have significantly outpaced their female peers in America and Europe. In the United States, women hold less than 20 percent of the seats in Congress; similarly, in Britain, women make up just over one-fifth of the members of the House of Commons. Compare this to South Africa, where more than 40 percent of representatives in the National Assembly are women, or Rwanda, where 64 percent of all members of Parliament are women — making it the only country in the world where women outnumber men in the legislature.

Beginning in the 1980s, many African countries started to invest in girls' education and in small enterprise projects. A generation later, an equal number of girls and boys are enrolled in primary schools across the continent. Many women are successful entrepreneurs and, of course, politicians. Precisely because of these rapid changes in women's status, the backlash from churches, political parties, traditional leaders and rural officials has been forceful. Outrage at bold women is both spontaneous and organized. The mob mentality that leads to public strippings arises in urban milieus where male aggression against women is seen as acceptable. Meanwhile, many churches systematically preach female subservience, while traditional tribal leaders often blame women for dislodging men from their rightful places in modern societies.

It has taken some time for this conservative backlash to develop into a coherent and organized force, but today these churches, traditional leaders and politicians are forming powerful coalitions that are seeking to challenge decades of progress.

First, this loose men's movement developed a set of "decency bills" urging women not to undermine their African culture by dressing "inappropriately." In Uganda, an anti-pornography bill initially sought to criminalize the display of "sexual parts of a person such as breasts, thighs, buttocks or genitalia" and to ban behavior that might cause sexual excitement. Overzealous police officers began to arrest women wearing short skirts even before Parliament voted on the measure. Fierce opposition from women's groups forced changes

to the final bill signed last year by President Yoweri Museveni, but it remains a vague and problematic law that gives broad discretion to state officials to define pornography and arrest those suspected of an ill-defined crime.

Second, and more pernicious, the movement against women's rights has resorted to bullying and baiting successful women in public spaces. In South Africa, one of the most popular and trusted figures in the country is Thuli Madonsela, who holds the office of public protector. Political cartoonists often depict her as a caped superhero on a mission to bust corrupt politicians. She is widely respected for her refusal to back down in the face of political pressure related to her investigation of the government's spending on a palatial personal residence for President Jacob G. Zuma.

Despite her popularity, it hasn't been an easy ride for Ms. Madonsela and other women who occupy prominent public positions. They have often been subjected to sexist verbal abuse and taunts and jeers about how they look and dress. Members of the ruling party have had to be called to order after insulting Ms. Madonsela's appearance. Last year, a pregnant member of Parliament was mocked so viciously about the outfit she was wearing that she had to be hospitalized for stress.

THESE verbal assaults in the halls of power are mirrored by the experiences of women on the streets, who don't have easy access to the constitutional or party protections that public figures enjoy. Ordinary African women, it seems, are bearing the brunt of their sisters' progress. Street harassment is often a sign of deep-seated resentment of women's changing status in society. For men who were raised to believe that they are entitled to be breadwinners and receive sexual gratification and domestic subservience from women, the shift hasn't been easy. For younger men, modern values have jostled sharply against the lessons about manhood they learned at home. With high levels of unemployment and gaping inequalities, old conceptions of masculinity die hard.

South Africa has what is considered the most progressive constitution in the world, including a bill of rights that promotes and protects women's rights. Despite this, in 2012, the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa sponsored a bill in Parliament that would have effectively made all women in rural areas legal minors, subject to the whims of traditional chiefs. Had it become law, the bill would have created a separate legal system for millions of people living in rural areas. Chiefs would have been able to force their subjects to adhere to customary laws and practices that are outmoded and unconstitutional, and it would have been a crime for those living in areas covered by traditional courts to opt out and seek justice in the formal legal system.

This attempt to disenfranchise millions of women in one of Africa's most vibrant constitutional democracies demonstrates the extent to which advances in gender equality are often met with hostility.

Fortunately, the continent is home to loud and organized women's movements that have thus far been able to repel many attempts to undermine women's progress through protests and parliamentary campaigns and the creative use of media and technology.

Their protests have been daring and their collective message has been clear: The walk from the streets to the halls of power may be long, but the goal is well within reach.

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