Networking for women’s rights: academic centers, regional information networks, and feminist advocacy in southern Africa

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Women’s rights advocates, in southern Africa as elsewhere, have challenged gender inequality to advance the status of women in society and as a means to also address related, cumulative issues of disadvantage. As communication technologies and neoliberal globalization alter forms of communication, the potential for organizing, coalitions, and advocacy work across time and space, such as through transnational feminist networks (TFNs), has grown. Understanding the rise of TFNs has largely relied on historical narratives and case studies, and the literature has tended to emphasize transnational over regional dimensions. Our approach, however, finds that regional connections not only play an important role in linking TFNs to local women’s rights initiatives in southern Africa, but that information-rich academic institutes focusing on gender studies bring structure to local and regional information networks in the region and act as bridges between the local, regional, and global. Methodologically, we employ an innovative approach to visibly capture the work of regional and local activists by taking a meso-level snapshot of website links among 70 women’s rights organizations operating in southern Africa. We pair the network visualization with a case study of our central academic center, the African Gender Institute, to demonstrate the work of this critical hub in the local and regional communication network.

\textbf{KEYWORDS} Women’s rights; transnational feminist networks; communication network visualization; African Gender Institute; southern Africa

As contemporary globalization transforms information and communication technologies, as well as opportunities for transportation, the potential for organizing, coalitions, and advocacy work across time and space, such as through transnational advocacy networks (TANs), has also grown (Montoya 2013; Scott 2001). Increasingly, transnational feminist networks (TFNs) operate as significant mechanisms for the mobilization and amplification of
local concerns nationally and around the globe, sometimes spanning the
global North and South, as in successful anti-violence campaigns. Understand-
ing the relatively recent rise of TFNs has relied on a combination of case
studies and historical narratives to document and theorize the global expan-
sion of women’s rights advocacy. While significant strides in feminist scholar-
ship have clarified the politics and complexity of transnational feminist
advocacy work (Chowdhury 2011; Kelly 2005; Moghadam 2005; Montoya
2013), much of the literature on transnational organizing emphasizes global
or Northern actors and North-to-South resource flows.

Our previous research, however, found that regional networks in the periph-
ery proved critical for successfully advancing women’s status in Lesotho,
southern Africa (Braun and Dreiling 2010), raising questions for us about
the significance of regional and local dynamics in transnational organizing.
These points echo similar ones raised by Adams (2006), Tripp (2006), and
Tripp et al. (2009) in their research on women’s rights advocacy work and fem-
inist mobilization more generally in Africa, all finding that continent-wide,
regional, and sub-regional organizing proved critical in their cases. Academic
centers focusing on women’s and gender studies show up as an important
support to feminist mobilization within some of these narratives. We comp-
plement and build on this research by introducing a method that triangulates
different levels of analysis, including regional network analyses of information
and communication weblinkages and an organizational case study of one aca-
demic center that is a central hub within those information networks. Specifi-
cally, we wanted to understand how transnational linkages with a local and
regional basis in women’s rights organizations are bolstered not simply by
global North organizations but by regional partnerships and hubs within
the global South, such as academic centers. Is there a network structure to
these partnerships and are these reflected in the communication and advoc-
cacy work of these organizations? Does this further validate how academic
centers provide potent symbolic resources and support to feminist mobiliz-
ation and advocacy work?

Focusing on southern Africa, we take a methodologically innovative
approach of pairing a network-visualization heuristic, which allows us to
map the structure of website links among organizations, with a narrative
case study. The network visualization tells us something about the structure
of information exchanges and inter-organizational alliances of women’s
rights advocacy at the local and regional level in southern Africa. This
meso-level view also allows us to see it is not the global TFNs but the regional
“hubs” – actors that are central in the network – with which local women’s
rights organizations are most likely to share links. Our case study, the
African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South
Africa, is situated at the center of the information exchange network. The pro-
minence of AGI in this communication network validates previous research
findings that regional actors and their networks play an important bridging role, linking local to transnational advocacy work, and that academic centers specifically have the unique research expertise, symbolic resources, and institutional prominence to perform as a central hub in local and regional feminist advocacy. As part of the South African university system, AGI is situated within a relatively resource-rich institution within the larger region of southern Africa, and therefore is positioned within the core rather than the periphery of regional women’s centers and academic institutions. In our case study of AGI, we demonstrate in greater detail how the strategic development and work of the Institute established it as a critical information hub in the larger network of women’s rights and advocacy organizations across the region.

Inspired by Enloe (2007), we take a “feminist curiosity” approach to de-center global North actors and highlight regional women’s rights organizations networking across borders in the global South to promote feminist social change and policy. Consequently, analyses of women’s advocacy and political action must investigate the intersections of the local, regional, and global, and employ multiple kinds of methodologies to capture and understand the networks of communication and information exchange that connect feminist activism. In contrast to emphasizing the transnational dimensions of these networks, we seek to understand the structure of communication and information exchange of local and regional women’s rights activists and their allies as a mirror of their advocacy work. This structural snapshot captures the connective ties of organizations and institutions whose aim is to mobilize feminist concerns and shift institutions, language, and practices over time, while drawing on the potential and challenges of an increasingly globalized world in locally meaningful ways.

**Literature review**

Contemporary globalization is often characterized by rapid economic and social change, including uneven patterns of growth and development across and within countries. Research on the contradictory effects of globalization continues to reveal important new articulations of social processes, institutions, and policies, at the same time that they render visible the persistence of particular hierarchical social relations, such as patriarchy, and inequalities based in race, gender, and class, among other relations of power (Braun 2011; McGovern and Wallimann 2012; Moghadam 2005). Women have also been active agents for change, mobilizing with allies locally, regionally, and transnationally to agitate for women’s rights and to challenge inequality in formal and informal ways to shift power dynamics and promote political change (Basu 2017; Braun 2008), as has been documented elsewhere and in Africa (Steady 2006).
In the mid-1980s, emerging TFNs “brought together women from developed and developing countries alike to respond to economic pressures and patriarchal movements” (Moghadam 2005, 8). In explaining and exploring the transnationalization of feminist networks, feminist scholarship contributed to social theory concerning the role of civil society actors in transforming globalization from below (Smith 2008; McGovern and Wallimann 2012). Particularly influential was Keck and Sikkink’s demonstration of transnational advocacy networks as emergent forms of political agency and their concept of a “boomerang pattern,” which occurs when transnational allies help boost local demands, particularly when facing an intransigent state (1999). In the years since this work, the literature has expanded dramatically to examine and complicate relations among global and transnational advocacy organizations, particularly those involving border politics (Naples and Bickham Mendez 2014), gender mainstreaming (Walby 2005), and spanning the divides across the global North and South (Chowdhury 2011; Kelly 2005; Moghadam 2005).

Decentering the global, affirming the local

Ferree and Pudrovska (2006, 251) note that “transnational feminist NGOs tend to operate in network and coalition form” and that “feminist groups have built up dynamic networks of coalitions, with many interlocking lines of communication and cooperation … which may or may not have any grassroots mobilization behind them …” Often lacking local roots, these transnational coalition structures rely on local organizations and issues. For this reason, questions of power and privilege complicate transnational organizing, such as the possible steering of agendas by activists and organizations located in the global North (Steady 2006) and reproducing relations of domination and privilege that may marginalize actors and perspectives within the global South, even as they may seek to remedy seemingly shared goals (Braun and Dreiling 2014; Chowdhury 2011).

The particular questions for this paper emerged from prior research that problematized the dynamics of transnational, regional and local organizing and revealed patterns that seemed to support and to counter key assumptions in the literature. First, we examined the “boomerang pattern” in the southern African context. The literature has tended to laud the boomerang effect’s potential, suggesting that transnational advocacy networks, in sync with local groups, rather than reproducing global system inequalities, may, as Smith and Wiest conclude, “help sow the seeds for its transformation” (2005, 621). Consistent with Tripp (2006), our case tempered this view, demonstrating how privilege operates unevenly in TANs and how Northern organizations accrue significant benefits from “local” alliances in the global South (Braun and Dreiling 2014; see also Chowdhury 2011).
Second, previous research investigated a regional women’s rights organization working in Lesotho to change women’s legal status as minors to one of equality. The primary group in that case, Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), worked not only as a regional women’s legal advocacy group, but sustained growing ties to wider African and global TFNs (Braun and Dreiling 2010). Supportive links between local and regional women’s rights groups, like WLSA, allowed activists to expand their voice by forging a wider set of alliances with development, anti-violence, and health rights NGOs. While much of the literature on TANS emphasizes the benefits of global North linkages, like Adams (2006) and Tripp (2005, 2006), we found these regional networks in the periphery proved critical for successfully advancing women’s status in Lesotho (albeit moderately).

Cumulatively the emphasis in the literature on global North actors, resources, and influence can subsume all activist work that crosses local and regional borders with an image of a transnational global North–South flow, thereby painting an overly determined picture of local politics hinged to global relations of power. Certainly global relations shape local context; but it is the histories, politics, and cultures of people and places that continue to shape the material and symbolic worlds in which people live (Fernandes 2013). For this reason, the category of “transnational” risks omitting the important feminist activism and work happening through local, sub-regional, and regional actors (Tripp 2005, 2006), particularly as regional organizing in Africa is also transnational. Tripp emphasizes this point in her 2005 article in Feminist Africa, noting that “some of the most immediate and important transnational influences have come from other African countries through Africa-wide and sub-regional networks, meetings and media influences” (1).

**African feminist disruptions of a north-south dichotomy**

The challenges of colonization, independence, and underdevelopment have elevated development as a primary issue of governance and life in Africa (Steady 2006). The centrality of development as a focus for the continent has shaped how intersecting discourses, such as gender and gender inequality, are framed and taken up by various institutions over time. Political liberalization during the 1990s coincided with other large-scale changes across southern Africa, as it did elsewhere around the world. These macro-historical shifts also opened opportunities for a substantial expansion of “women’s organizations and associational life more generally” (Tripp et al. 2009, 24). The expansion of women’s organizations coincided with feminist interventions in prominent discourses of development, democracy, and globalization. Gender and women’s studies programs and departments became critical to feminist mobilization within Africa, bringing legitimacy to gender and gender inequality with empirical research, as well as providing “practical
gender expertise in policy, NGOs, and grassroots contexts” within development (Tripp et al. 2009, 94). Consequently, these programs “are often described as the ‘academic arm’ of the women’s movement and see their linkages to the activist elements of the movement as vital to their existence” (Tripp et al. 2009, 92).

For Ahikire (2008, 2014) and others (Abbas and Mama 2014; Boyce Davies 2014; Hassim 2006; Mama 2005a), the successful legitimation of gender as a concept and gender inequality as an issue in society, particularly evident within development discourses and institutions, simultaneously represents victories and challenges. Ahikire notes “African feminism has been able to bring the key role of gender in African underdevelopment to many international arenas” and these advances came from years of hard work by feminists within and for Africa who “pushed demands for gender equality into development discourse and earned this legitimacy” (2014, 12), helping to shift regional and global norms. The case of women’s political participation is a clear example of success of organizing based on the spread of regional norms (Tripp 2005), and regional and sub-regional organizing of African women’s organizations was critical in successful lobbying of the African Union (AU) (Adams 2006). Charters, protocols, and conventions that include legitimations of the concept of gender inequality, and commitments to redressing it, document the progress made by gender advocates. Even as the policy commitments of states and institutions to gender equality have rarely been realized, the successes of changing the discourses and garnering inclusion may indeed be seen as victories.

Ahikire (2014) argues that this feminist work happened on multiple fronts, including the intentional building of support for feminist intellectual and activist spaces, which often faced a hostile climate within a number of institutions. In spite of challenges, feminist scholars and activists developed research and intellectual networks across Africa to cultivate feminist knowledge production via scholar groups such as CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), and to share practices in the struggle against intersecting oppressions, such as colonization, imperialism, patriarchies, racism, classism, heterosexism, nationalism, and others. Universities in particular became sites of struggle and engagement for feminist intellectuals pushing for changes in both the production of knowledge about Africa (Ahikire 2014) and gender (Oyewumi 2005), as well as policy-oriented research about the conditions affecting ordinary people (Mama, in Abbas 2014).

Decreases in state support for universities, in South Africa as well as across the region, constricted opportunities for concerted initiatives for feminist intellectual engagement and community collaboration. This compounded the difficulties of advancing feminist projects in institutions already hostile to this work. The broader effects of neoliberal priorities on universities were felt unevenly across the region. However, even in the relatively elite University
of Cape Town, sustaining feminist advocacy faced persistent resource challenges. Feminist scholarship, activism, and community work continues to happen despite the lack of support and funding (Mama, in Abbas 2014).

Cumulatively, this previous work raises questions as to why regional organizing and feminist centers for research and knowledge have not figured more prominently in the literature on TFNs and gender politics in Africa (see Tripp et al. 2009, for a notable exception). We aim to intervene in this conversation in at least two ways. First, there is a long and strong history of creative and resilient feminist scholarship and activism within Africa that often does not receive its deserved respect or acknowledgement for its contributions to both feminist studies and African studies (Ahikire 2014; Mama 2005b). The empirical element of this paper reveals the centrality of southern African feminist thought and action to activists and organizations in the region. Second, perspectives about gender and inequality within Africa – in all their diversity, such as differing conceptions of gender, the issues and solutions related to inequality, or even how inequality is understood – are often lost or marginalized when framing occurs through global discourses that draw heavily from Western ideologies and are then applied locally. This has the effect of reproducing a politics of knowledge that is Western-centric and is likely not calibrated to local contexts or may not be meaningful to people’s lives. Examining a selection of works from feminist scholars at the African Gender Institute (AGI) reveals why knowledge claims from AGI circulate in ways analogous to a “boomerang effect” among local and regional feminist organizations.

Our case study and the network of websites studied below presents a unique analytical edge for studying gender, politics, and the interplay of local, national, and regional networks. Our network visualization of the web interactions allow us to consider how local women’s rights organizations privilege regional academic centers on their websites and consequently draw on the important symbolic resources that the AGI – and other institutes – intentionally produce with the aim of promoting feminist activism in the region. Feminist academic centers, like AGI, thus contribute to an important regional dialectic, bringing an array of symbolic resources that are relevant to – and in some cases directly serve – local struggles and campaigns. With expertise on international law, conventions and treaties, regional academic institutions like AGI help foster the tools that link and amplify local campaigns in ways that resonate with regional and transnational institutions. In addition to the provision of important information for local women’s rights projects, academic centers also reinforce the legitimacy and status of claims related to regional feminist projects and women’s rights organizations, amplifying their concerns and perspectives to transnational connections, including scholarship that spans divides across the global North and South.
Methodology

Understanding women’s and feminist institutions as “networks” in the methodological sense involves important epistemological shifts, demanding a relational approach to human collective agency and social change as is often found in feminist theories, ecology, and new technologies of communication (Ferree and Pudovska 2006). This project builds on those developments to employ a network heuristic of website inter-relations linked with a case narrative using archival materials and website content. We employ network visualization tools to map regional women’s rights organizations active in six countries in southern Africa (inclusive South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia), some of which are part of continental and global feminist networks.

The network visualization provides a unique interpretive tool to identify prominent cases for further investigation. Indeed, the selection of AGI as a case study was determined because of the central role that AGI played in the website network (see Figure 1). Of course, AGI is a known entity to feminist scholars of the region. In this way, the network visualization affirmed the particular substantive knowledge we had and also validated some assumptions about the important role played by feminist intellectuals in facilitating a dialectic between AGI and regional feminist and women’s rights advocacy organizations. A thorough study of published AGI documents was thus examined. This archival research also provided access to documentation of an interview with former director of AGI, Dr. Amina Mama, which we rely on for the case narrative. Combined, both methodological angles bring insight to communication relations and influence across feminist and women’s advocacy organizations in southern Africa.

The network analysis began with a 2011 list of 73 regional organizations working specifically on gender or women’s rights issues that was publicized via the United Nation’s Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA). The OSAA described the purpose of their database as one explicitly designed to facilitate information exchange between local civil society and governments, as well as transnationally. Not all of the groups listed had active websites when the data was collected in 2011. Forty-seven did, though five did not have an English-language option and nine had no discernible links to other organizations, leaving 33 organizations with websites and outside links. The network data was collected from these 33 groups whose primary focus was on gender and women’s rights issues in southern Africa in 2011. Additional organizations were added if one of the original 33 groups linked to an organization that worked in the region and explicitly included in its organizational description gender, reproductive health, feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ), or the rights of women and girls. Thirty-seven additional groups were added. The analysis presented in this paper consists
Figure 1. Network visualization of website-links among women’s rights organizations in southern Africa, 2011 ($n = 70$).

Note: Node-size plotted by betweenness centrality and node-shape by type of organization/institution. Plotted with NodeXL (Smith et al. 2010).
of a network involving the 33 organizations from the U.N. list and 37 other women’s rights organizations in the region that shared at least one connection to the 33.¹

The data was then organized to create a spreadsheet that documents the organizations and their weblinks in a column and row format. This data structure is the basis for visualizing whether organizations/institutions connect via a website link. This resulting table consists of 70 WROs with 176 unique weblinks among themselves. We used NodeXL (Smith et al. 2010) to plot this data and compute various network statistics. This software was also used to identify measures of centrality that indicate the relative prominence of these organizations within the network. In Figure 1, nodes are sized by their betweenness centrality score, rendering visible their relative prominence. This particular measure identifies the centrality of a node (organization) based on the total number of shortest paths between all others (discussed further below). An organization with a high value can be understood to have more influence in how information is transferred throughout the network. Additionally, groups with similar patterns of linkages are placed in proximity to each other based on an “attraction-repulsion” algorithm that helps visualize similar pairs and subgroups of nodes in a complex network.² The resulting graphic plots highly prominent, or well-connected organizations more centrally and less prominent organizations peripherally.

We included only organizations/institutions with an active website that identifies gender, LGBTQ, reproductive health, or women’s rights as a primary part of their mission and who operate in one of the six countries in the region in 2011. Several of the organizations are multi-issue in their focus, linking concerns of women to a wider spectrum of environmental, educational, health, human rights, poverty, and violence prevention concerns. A quick study of these groups reveal that they share connections with other local and global organizations, visible in their web links to partners, supporters and allies. We recognize these website links tell us something about the way communication and representation between organizations occurs, but does not necessarily reflect the full picture of these social relations and what these organizations do on the ground in their actual advocacy work (see also Ferree and Pudrovska 2006). In the next section, we discuss our analysis of the network visualization and detail our AGI case to demonstrate the significance of our findings.

Analysis and discussion

The network visualization of weblinks among women’s organizations in Figure 1 has several analytical features worth elaborating. All nodes are sized and shaped according to two important features of the network. First, we coded all groups by their primary organizational type, represented by one of 6
distinct node-shapes: academic departments, journals, institutes and associations are denoted by a sphere; LGBTQ advocacy and health support organizations are denoted by a triangle; religiously affiliated service organizations are denoted with an open circle; women’s regional and continent-wide legal and development organizations are denoted by a diamond; local and national feminist and women’s rights organizations denoted by a full circle; and general human rights and anti-violence organizations are denoted by a square. Particularly notable are four clustering patterns among groups. Religiously affiliated organizations are almost entirely grouped together in the upper right segment of the graph and, opposite we see general human rights and anti-violence organizations. LGBTQ and health support organizations are clustered into two groups, with a larger segment in the bottom of the graph and a smaller segment consisting of two groups who linked to each other’s websites in 2011 at the top of the graph. At the core of the graph are academic institutes and departments (spheres) and regional or Africa-specific women’s organizations (diamonds). Only local women’s advocacy organizations (full circles) are spread throughout the graph, mostly at the periphery of the denser core where the highly connected academic bodies (e.g., AGI) and women’s African development groups (e.g., Women in Law and Development in Africa) form information hubs.

The second important feature depicted in the network layout is that node-size is determined by its betweenness centrality. Technically, betweenness centrality refers to the number of shortest paths from all nodes to all others that pass through each respectively measured node. This is a very important measure in network theory because it tells something about how much potential control each node has in the distribution of information or other resources in a network (Kolaczyk 2009). In our graph, this feature is complemented by the visualization of the sheer number of connections each node has to others in the network: this is commonly referred to as degree centrality and is represented visually by the number of lines or edges that connect each node to others. Nodes with high degree centrality tend toward the center of the graph. Combined, the visual representation of betweenness and degree centrality provides two types of information that can be briefly illustrated with a few examples.

Take the example of Gender at Work, a transnational organization with an office in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2011 it shared three links with other groups in this network, a relatively low degree centrality. But its betweenness centrality was quite high with 635 “shortest paths” that crossed through Gender at Work in route between all pairs of nodes in the network. Referring to Figure 1, it is visibly apparent why Gender at Work achieves this value: it forms a bridge between the main cluster on the left and the small cluster on the upper right of the graph. Among network scholars, it is common to refer to nodes in these types of positions as brokers; in this case as information...
mediators between two fairly distinct clusters of women’s advocacy organizations/institutions. Also acting as an information broker is AGI, the most central node in the network with a degree centrality of 33 shared weblinks and 2131 “shortest paths” crossing through AGI in the network. Visibly, the University of Cape Town’s African Gender Institute is highly prominent relative to other women’s and gender studies programs or institutes at neighboring South African, Zimbabwean, and Namibian universities. This no doubt stems from the elite status of the university, but also from the explicit initiative by scholars at AGI. The institute not only shares links among a wide cross-section of groups across the region, it also serves as an important broker, or efficient information bridge, between local groups and continent-wide and global groups. We observe this breadth of connection in AGI’s links to transnational groups like Gender at Work and local groups like OUT – LGBT Wellbeing. For groups with low betweenness centrality, such as OUT or the Nisaa Institute for Women’s Development (a local partner abuse center and shelter near Johannesburg), the AGI provides a regional information hub with which these groups can connect digitally, share information about multiple issues, amplify local causes and recognize more resource-rich allies.

More abstractly, these weblinks reflect a symbolic affiliation among allies across a multi-organizational field, all of who take part in broader actions and conversations about gender, sexualities and women’s rights in the region. Some of the organizations are primarily local while others are regional or pan-African and some are transnational with offices or projects in southern Africa. Many of the 2011 links among smaller, local organizations referenced publications or studies sponsored by the institutes and centers, serving as one point of connection among organizations in these communication networks. We also noted numerous instances where local organizations appear to rely on other forms of support from academic centers, including guidance with grant writing and management, legal aid, and public messaging. In this way, organizations such as the AGI provide a symbolic and intellectual resource to the more dispersed network of advocacy-oriented organizations. This is apparent with smaller academic centers as well, as seen in the link between the Nisaa partner abuse center and shelter near Johannesburg and the University of South Africa’s Institute for Gender Studies. As “hubs” in this network, feminist centers in southern Africa form bridges between local women’s rights organizations and a wider web of women’s, feminist, and LGBTQ groups in the region.

It is important to note that while the network visualization can reveal a web-based communication structure among organizations, we cannot determine the specific nature of their relationships without further investigation. Every indication during data collection suggested that the links organizations had to others in 2011 signified a positive relationship at least in terms of substantive content – such as links to published reports by institutes or centers –
for those organizations. We acknowledge that the relationships between these organizations, or actors within them, are more complex than this methodology can capture. However, the network mapping offers a meaningful approach to distill a complex array of information and then identify interesting patterns. In our snapshot, the distinct core–periphery layout (which is not uncommon in many types of social networks) suggests that academic centers and institutes play an important informational role among local, regional and transnational advocacy organizations. Local groups are able, for example, to cite research, reference legal or international standards, and identify other allies through these academic centers, thus helping frame and amplify local agendas. We elaborate on some of these dynamics with a more in-depth examination of the most central information hub in the 2011 network: the African Gender Institute (AGI) in South Africa.

**African Gender Institute**

The African Gender Institute (AGI) is part of the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. According to their website, AGI is: “a feminist research unit, committed to political work on the African continent. We focus on writing, publications, research processes and partnerships, network-building and participative learning” (AGI 2015).

Growing out of South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy, AGI evolved from a University of Cape Town (UCT) initiative called the Equal Opportunities Research Project, directed by Marni Piggot, to become a formal institute and a teaching department at UCT in 1999. Acting Director Amanda Gouws led the transition from an outreach project to a research and teaching unit, after which Amina Mama became AGI Director. AGI advocated for women in academia and for African feminist intellectuals more generally, many of who were often experiencing isolation and discrimination at their institutions. Early work at AGI focused on “research, networking and policy-design on the prevention of sexual harassment in secondary and tertiary SADC education,” and “the promotion of e-access and e-capacity to feminist NGO’s [sic] in African country-contexts” (AGI 2012, 19). Amina Mama, former Director of AGI for over a decade, reflects on the Institute’s first ten years in an interview with Hakima Abbas (2014, 4):

While I was working with colleagues at the African Gender Institute (AGI) in the early post-apartheid years, from 1999 to 2009, we developed three main strategies of engagement. The first was to resist the racist and imperialistic tendencies of early post-apartheid South African academic culture by insisting on working to create collaborative spaces that could be occupied by feminist scholars from all over Africa, and then protecting these from being overwhelmed by the eager beneficiaries of apartheid and Western domination. The second was to insist on locating our teaching and research as an integral aspect of feminist
movements on the African continent … The third and most subversive strategy emerged by default. When the already challenging environment of a historically white university became increasingly unfavorable in the context of higher education reforms, the initial vision of institutionalizing a continental resource that could accredit and support feminist teaching and research all over the continent simply became unrealizable. We therefore found ourselves relying on a feminist strategy of intellectual networking, convening curriculum development and research projects dispersed across multiple locations in East, West and Southern Africa, instead of staying to build a feminist “centre of excellence” that would, in retrospect, probably have been more vulnerable to the intensifying constraints of a University embracing neoliberal reforms, even as it proclaimed its transformation.

As Mama suggests, the history of racial and gender politics in South Africa, and South Africa’s status as a regional power more generally, shaped how AGI developed. Located in a historically white university shortly after the end of apartheid, gendered and racialized hierarchies persisted within the institutional cultures of higher education – indeed, they still persist such that African women in the academy continue to face marginalization and largely occupy positions of less power. Race and race relations have been and continue to be important dimensions to the constitution of AGI, as well as within the sub-regional networks and discourses in which it participates. While African women as a group are incredibly diverse, their shared experiences of being gendered and racialized through social institutions and processes within diverse histories and circumstances across sub-Saharan Africa is in part what made the development of AGI possible. Over time, AGI became an important contact point for feminist intellectuals across Africa to develop and support African women’s voices, knowledges, and agency within postcolonial frameworks, and the Institute ran major projects like GWS Africa, Strengthening Gender and Women’s Studies for Africa’s Transformation, which has connected and linked feminist researchers and teachers working in gender and sexualities across Africa since 2002. AGI also publishes the open access gender studies journal, Feminist Africa, designs and runs trainings, seminars, workshops, and teaching modules, and supports applied projects in communities that promote feminist ideas and support women, equality, and access to technology.

Like other academic centers in this network, the African Gender Institute works with activists and organizations in the field who then draw on the intellectual expertise and institutional prominence of those centers. This relational context both amplifies local claims and inspires feminist reflexivity across a wider array of interests and issues.

Our work has consistently focused, both within and beyond our university environment, on the epistemological challenges of working with issues of gender and sexualities in African contexts to ensure that those with grounded expertise in questions of (for example) land, peace and conflict, sexual and
reproductive health and rights, and institutional cultures are supported and recognised. (AGI 2012, 5)

AGI’s future priorities, articulated in its 2012 vision brochure, includes continuing to pair leadership to capacity-building and research in their four primary multi-year programs of collaborative research, namely: Feminist e-Knowledges; Gender, Peace-building and Transitional Justice in African Contexts; Sexual and Reproductive Rights; and Livelihoods, Gender and Entrepreneurship: “In continental contexts, such work is often driven from within NGOs; it is critical, however, that excellent research, intellectual partnerships, and cross-national dialogue within universities contribute to NGO and policy-oriented initiatives” (AGI 2012, 6). AGI makes connections between this local and cross-national work and larger global initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): “The politics of gender and sexualities play pivotal roles in negotiating how it may be possible to reach many MDG goals, and especially MDG 3, through the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women” (AGI 2012, 6).

The AGI has demonstrated a commitment to facilitating feminist politics with a savvy use of technology and research projects. Between 1999 and 2011, AGI’s numerous projects with academic, community, and activist partners, including publishing Feminist Africa since 2002, provided intellectual and symbolic resources to amplify feminist advocacy throughout the region. Their 2012 report, which reflects on many accomplishments, self-consciously acknowledges this role:

The experience of the African Gender Institute, within the University of Cape Town, offers an example of the possibility of creating research programmes, developed and delivered through partnerships across the continent, whose outputs contribute in concrete ways to strengthening transformation within African contexts. (AGI 2012, 5)

As AGI both emerged within and helped form the communication network that was captured in our data snapshot, we see how both the structure of organizational relations relates to the identity crafted by activists and scholars in the institute. The multiplicity of web-exchanges between AGI and other women’s rights advocacy organizations reflects an identity committed to a multi-issue feminist project.

The unique role of AGI as a network hub does not discount the institute’s interdependence and reliance on wider feminist networks, locally, regionally, and globally. A feminist epistemological sensibility – grounded in a relational approach to mutuality and autonomy – has informed AGI’s work with local and national partnerships directed at developing and strengthening the organizational capacity and strategic advocacy of the respective groups:
Feminist work is dependent on strong organizational relationships between differently located centres of activism within one locale. The AGI is located within a university context but relies for much of its core strength on relationships with a range of NGOs and activists. (AGI 2012, 18)

AGI intentionally strives to bridge academic and activist efforts in the struggle for feminist social change. “The African Gender Institute is one of the few initiatives which work with the link between intellectual and activist agency as central to addressing the challenges faced by African-based feminist academics, activists and practitioners” (AGI 2012, 10). A core value running through AGI’s work regionally is to center African, and at times particularly South African, perspectives and knowledge on issues of gender, sexualities, empowerment, and justice. Bridging local, regional and global feminist aims remain important to AGI’s expressed identity as the organization positions itself amid shifting terrains of knowledge production that too often ignore or minimize African voices. AGI participates in distinctly South African knowledge production with “strong and grounded research” to remain engaged with the shifting terrain of globalized and transnational knowledge claims. Their work can be understood as a larger intellectual and political project that centers knowledge production on efforts to sustain feminist social change, while offering a politically engaged counterbalance to the uneven, unequal history of knowledge production about and within Africa.

Such strong, grounded research and local knowledge production is evident in AGI’s project on strengthening the leadership of young women on issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at five SADC (Southern African Development Community) universities between 2010 and 2011 (the University of Zimbabwe, the University of Botswana, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Namibia, and the University of Cape Town). This Ford Foundation-supported research was run in part by Jane Bennett, current director of AGI, and was the progression of previous work that supported African feminist writers, researchers and activists to understand and integrate the politics of sexuality and gender into their work. Bennett and Chigudu (2012) reflect on the collective recognition of

the need to move into work directly engaging the young women who were so frequently the topics of discussion about gender-based violence, the impact of economic stress on options for sexuality, and the meaning of reproductive rights in politically troubled contexts. Because so much of this research assumes that it is poor, rural or working-class women who should be the focus of exploration, we deliberately chose to work with (not “on”) young women with largely lower-middle class backgrounds, on higher education campuses, and with very diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. (5–6)

The “cross-generational, action research projects” (Bennett and Chigudu 2012, 17) provided interesting results that challenged notions of dominant development discourses about gender, violence, and sexual and reproductive health
and rights. These findings were disseminated in multiple ways to impact local conditions at the five universities and to shape larger processes of knowledge production, such as to local university administrations, through exhibitions and performances, and publication (Wekwete and Manyeruke 2012, 99). The authors argue this dissemination was key towards connecting research to influence political participation and policymaking, with local claims being reinforced and amplified by institutes and centers like AGI (Wekwete and Manyeruke 2012).

The Gender, Peace-building and Transitional Justice in Africa: Communication Advocacy and Resource Development Projects run by AGI also illustrate these values and practices well. These initiatives grew out of a response to the increased international attention and rhetoric about “women, peace and security, particularly in post-conflict zones,” after the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 codified a commitment to integrate a gender perspective in all its peace and security efforts (AGI 2012, 8). Yet, according to AGI, despite the increased attention to violence against women in conflict, the actual experiences of women were still largely invisible and recent events in a number of African countries provided evidence that gender-based violations would go unaddressed despite international commitments to do otherwise. AGI’s projects aim to intervene in this international dialogue, both to strengthen and support the implementation of laws, policies and action plans that address these gendered dimensions of social conflict, but also to ensure that the international discourse, and the policies and actions that flow from it, are “locally informed and owned” by researchers, practitioners, and activists working on these issues in African contexts (AGI 2012, 9).

Speaking to the intersection of feminist work in African universities, Mama and Barnes (2007) acknowledged the relational space for praxis, linking institutes like AGI with “… the crucial investigative, profile-raising and support work of transnational feminist networks and organisations” (Mama and Barnes 2007, 6). As the case of AGI demonstrates, institutes and centers at universities in southern Africa that focus on gender studies and gender issues can learn from, amplify, and clarify local and regional information exchanges among women’s rights organizations. This coupling of regional centers and institutes to local advocacy organizations provides a crucial “on the ground” network that allows those local organizations to link to transnational advocacy networks in ways that can deepen feminist advocacy and change in the region while remaining locally informed.

**Conclusion**

Our research demonstrates how feminist institutes and centers, like the university-based African Gender Institute, provide a critical hub for information exchange on women’s rights and women’s advocacy work on multiple
issues throughout the region. More generally, our data captures the significant bridging role that university-based centers can play in linking and amplifying local women’s rights issues and campaigns to regional and transnational feminist networks. Moreover, we see how the hubs in the web network bring a multi-issue identity to the larger feminist movement in the region, integrating specific, sometimes single issue advocacy organizations (along the spokes in the network), to the wider array of concerns articulated at the center of the network in organizations like AGI. This network analysis helped identify AGI as an important player in the communication network and also directed our attention to AGI for further analysis. The communication network, and the specific case of AGI, demonstrates how the organizing efforts of scholars and activists interested in issues of women and gender in the region and sub-region intersect with globalizing forces. Specifically transnational communication and support is evident between regional and sub-regional advocacy networks that take the shape of a core–periphery structure. This core–periphery structure, with hubs like AGI in the center and issue specific advocacy organizations in the periphery, indicate a pattern analogous to the transnational boomerang effect.

Our primary finding, that weblinks appear to be disproportionately forged via regional or national university feminist centers or programs (and parallel transnational women’s rights organizations), is consistent with expectations from scholarship. These research institutions have the resources to conduct the discursive and organizational praxis of translating local women’s rights concerns into a language that resonates with local and transnational feminist advocacy. There are two observations to consider further. First, the institutes at the center of the network like AGI amplify and distribute strategies, information, and African feminist perspectives to a wider periphery of women’s rights organizations. In this way, institutes like AGI can create a regional boomerang effect where more peripheral organizations find allies in the feminist practitioners at AGI who can then amplify and magnify sub-regional and local concerns. Second, the communication network makes visible the bridging roles played by organizations that link local women’s rights campaigns to wider feminist networks. This network visualization reinforces our historical narrative, explaining how ties of feminist political and institutional action criss-cross regional-subregional and global North–South divides. Given the significance of university institutes and centers focused on gender and gender issues, and evidence of the serious decline of dedicated gender studies-oriented spaces within African universities in the first decade of the twenty-first century (AGI 2012), our analysis reveals potential opportunities for promoting institutes and centers dedicated to gender-oriented research and programs as a way to bolster successful feminist social change.

South Africa’s history of apartheid and economic dominance in the region makes the case unique in several ways. However, literature on women’s studies
centers elsewhere in Africa (see Tripp et al. 2009) suggest that this case may have wider applicability to other countries in Africa, particularly those that may be experiencing political and societal changes. These larger changes may open up the possibilities for the growth of women’s rights organizations and the development and support of academic centers focused on women’s and gender issues who can lend expertise locally, and amplify the concerns of women’s rights advocates regionally and transnationally.

Analytically, the use of a visual network heuristic supports a relational approach to the study of local, national, regional and global feminist advocacy networks, revealing elements of organizational bridges that arise among local African activists and scholars and help forge resource and communication networks in the region. Furthermore, this research suggests that a “boomerang” pattern may operate at the regional and sub-regional levels, not just across the global North and South. As local advocacy organizations make claims that are reinforced and amplified by institutes or centers with knowledge authority, local claims are empowered. In sum, women’s advocacy organizations in southern Africa created a communication network to advance efforts on behalf of women throughout the region, with information hubs at the network center, as represented by scholars and activists at AGI, and a larger network structure that mimics regional and subregional boomerang patterns which facilitate resilient and multi-issue feminist practice.

Notes

1. Notably, the number of websites and weblinks among women’s and feminist organizations in southern Africa has increased many fold since early 2011 when this data was collected. Recent data collection techniques for web-based and social media connections may make it feasible to replicate this study on a much larger scale in the near term. However, these are not straightforward methodologies for social science and humanistic inquiries, at least not yet. The manual data collection methods used in 2011 are not feasible for replication in 2017.

2. We use the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm in NodeXL, developed at Stanford’s Social Media Research Foundation, http://www.smrfoundation.org (Smith et al. 2010). This is part of a class of spring-embedded methods that establishes an attraction and repulsion force among each vertex (or node) in the graph, defined by the relative distance of all possible pairs and an iteratively determined solution to plot each node (Kolaczyk 2009).

3. Because the range of values between high and low betweenness scores can be quite large, we used a NodeXL feature to scale the range so that the largest nodes would not overwhelm the graph and the smallest nodes would remain visible.

4. We illustrate some of these concepts with these four examples: Gender at Work (http://genderatwork.org/Home.aspx); African Gender Institute (http://agi.ac.za/); Out – LGBT Well-being (http://www.out.org.za/); and Nisaa Women’s Development (http://www.nisaa.org.za/).
5. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for these details.
6. We are very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this analysis.

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