

Retrieving the Voices of Black African Womanists and Feminists for Work Towards Decoloniality in Social Work

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Abstract

The voices of Black African feminists and womanists are often excluded in debates about decoloniality and racism, despite their important scholarly contributions. In this article, we retrieve some of these voices with respect to research and scholarship about decoloniality generally and in work towards decoloniality in a social work programme specifically. During a previous critical and reflective participatory action research process, findings emerged that identified a number of thematic principles. These principles were deemed valuable for further work to disrupt coloniality and work towards decoloniality. These included positioning Afrika as the centre; analysing power dynamics at all levels; foregrounding race, class, and gender as interlocking forms of oppressions in the South African context; maintaining consciousness of structural issues; developing critical conscientisation; privileging the “voice” of those who are silenced; and embracing ubuntu without arrogating it. In this article, we revisit these emergent principles for work towards decoloniality, to recentre and situate Black African feminist and womanist perspectives more prominently. This is critical since Black African feminist and womanist voices are marginalised and elided while there is a critical imperative that they be brought to bear on these principles. These voices not only develop the work towards disrupting the coloniality of gender and patriarchy, but also provide greater depth and criticality to the set of principles.

Keywords: African feminisms; Africana womanisms; decoloniality; decolonisation; social work; education

UNISA 
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN
PRESS

Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SWPR/index>

Volume 34 | No. 1 | 2022 | #9011 | 30 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/9011>

ISSN 2708-9355 (Online)

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Introduction

Black African feminist and womanist voices are often hidden and obscured in decoloniality discourses, despite the extensive theorisation and critical debate (Mama 2005; Tyagi 2014) generated by these scholars. The masking of feminist and womanist voices is further exacerbated by the racist patriarchy of institutional cultures in most universities, including African universities, which rely on androcentric frameworks in the production of history and knowledge (Mama 2011; Matiluko 2020). Many postcolonial feminists and womanists¹ scholars interrogate issues of race, gender and class in the context of coloniality and patriarchy in the Black feminist tradition of recognising the simultaneity of oppressions (Smith 2013; Tyagi 2014), as was highlighted in Crenshaw's (2017) notion of intersectionality. In this article, we choose to situate decoloniality in the Black African feminist and womanist traditions rather than in historical "White" feminisms which failed to deal with the centrality of race and class (Davis 1983; Matiluko 2020). Many Black African women committed to redressing gender inequality are reluctant to align with or act under the auspices of "White" Western feminisms. "White" Western feminisms have historically ignored the experiences and concerns of African women, they tend to speak on behalf of Black African women, often focus primarily on the question of gender while ignoring race and tend to contribute to the oppression of African and Black women and men (Arndt 2000).

We are nevertheless conscious that notions of being African, Black African or even "woman" and "man" are contested and reinforce binaries and that there are complex arguments for both inclusion and exclusion of different bodies into these categorisations. Despite there being no simple answers to questions such as "Who then are Black African women? Do Indian and Coloured women in the South African context count as Black as articulated by Biko (1987)? Do White women who are born in Africa count as African?" And of course, the complexities of categorisations of trans or other non-conforming people into simplistic gender binaries remain problematic.

In this article, we centre the voices of various Black African women from across continents whose work epitomises decoloniality in a way that is as inclusive as possible, and with recognition of the diversities of feminisms and womanisms both in Africa and between Africa and the diaspora – where many women with African ascendancy reside. We attempt to include the voices of mostly Black African feminists and African womanists both largely based on the geohistorical reference of women in Afrika, but also to some extent those from the diaspora to include the pan-Africanist connection of Black women who are from Afrika or have African ascendancy (Mekgwe 2010, 192).

Although we would have liked to foreground contested, sublimated and marginalised voices of scholars who have made inputs related to the themes for decoloniality and

1 We write womanist/feminist not to equate these schools of thought, but to include both.

gender as far as possible, we recognise that the subaltern cannot be spoken for and their voice may not be found in the academic texts that we searched. Consequently, those voices that are less heard and sublimated, especially those who write in languages other than English (Wa Thiong'o 1986), may have been missed inadvertently and we hope to hear from them for inclusion in follow-up work. We also note that various authors argue that to acknowledge the heterogeneity of understandings of the ways in which power manifests in gender relations, we use the plural forms of "feminisms" and "womanisms" where appropriate (Nnaemeka 1998; Rasool 2019, 2020).

We foreground Black African feminist and womanist voices by bringing these into dialogue with the emergent principles of decoloniality that were identified from a participatory action research process of working towards decoloniality in a South African higher education university context.² In so doing, we consciously move from dominant masculinist interpretations (Kessi and Boonzaier 2018) to a critically reflexive feminist and womanist engagement with decoloniality, as they relate to social work knowledge and practice. The principles that emerged through critical reflection and analysis of decoloniality work towards transformation of social work are: positioning Afrika as the centre; accounting for power dynamics in structures, systems, and relationships; confronting the oppressive hierarchies of race, class, and gender; adopting a structural perspective to uncover oppressive and inequitable social structures; critical conscientisation as a precursor to foregrounding the "voice" of those who are marginalised; and ubuntu. In doing social work teaching and research about these themes, we recognised that the voices of African feminists and womanists were inadequately reflected in these articulations despite the critical importance of the transformative perspectives that they bring to these principles. We argue that the proliferation of decoloniality work sometimes fails to pay attention to asymmetrical power structures, dominance and material inequalities of gender, and therefore risk the reproduction of coloniality. Decoloniality as transformation (Fanon 1952) must therefore, in addition to engaging with broader structural inequalities and conditions, also explicitly attend to the problem of patriarchy and asymmetrical gender power relationships (Nkenkana 2015).

We understand decoloniality to mean the complete transformation of structures of material inequality, discrimination, oppressive power relations, inferiorisation, and Western-centric and colonial epistemologies that also perpetuate patriarchy. This should encompass the coloniality of power, being and knowledge as described by Quijano (2007) and Maldonado-Torres (2017). Through centralising the voices of Black African women to highlight the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2010), we incorporate the

2 Ethics clearance for the participatory action research process was obtained from the humanities ethics committee of the University of Johannesburg. The details of the research process are outlined in Harms-Smith and Rasool (2020) and Rasool and Smith (2021).

violence of unequal gender power relationships more explicitly into Quijano's (2007) framework of coloniality of power.

We therefore regard the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2008, 2010) as central to the interrogation and understanding of power relationships. We contend that if work towards decoloniality does not redress sexism and patriarchy in its knowing, being and doing, the coloniality of gender will remain and decoloniality will be incomplete. We draw on Cunha's (2019, 104) articulation of sexism as a

system of sexual differentiation based on biological evidence that encompasses attributes and social roles and presents two characteristics that should be mentioned here: it is hetero-patriarchal and androcentric. This means that the abyssal line created has male sexualities and heterosexual placing as its normative reference, with all others dependent on it or in an abnormal zone that should be controlled and dominated or even be inexistent.

Our recent work has been characterised by a critical engagement with issues of oppression, social transformation, decoloniality and gender (Harms-Smith 2020; Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020; Rasool 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b; Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021). However, when considering our contribution to this special edition in memory of our colleague and friend, Tessa Hochfeld, we recognised the importance of centring the voices of Black African feminists and womanists in the decoloniality agenda. This aligns with Tessa's commitment to include marginalised voices in her feminist positionality. As a White South African, she recognised the various privileges associated with her status and was, as we are, deeply committed to challenging patriarchy and sexism from a feminist lens since feminisms are "vocal, an act of life amidst debilitation and dying" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Wahab, and Al-Issa 2022, 6.).

Situating Decoloniality Within Black African Feminisms and Womanisms

The theories of Black African feminists and womanists emphasise the racialised nature of Black women's experiences and highlight the oppressive social and cultural conditions that surround women's lives in Afrika³ and the diaspora, foregrounding issues of voice, power, silences, knowledge, sisterhood and agency (Frenkel 2008; Gqola 2001; Meena 1992). Black African feminisms and womanisms emerged from a critique of early "White" feminisms that were seen as Western imports such as liberal, radical, Marxist and socialist feminisms, which did not account for the suffering of Black women through slavery and colonialism, and their devaluation, as well as the prevalence of racism among feminists (hooks 1981, 2003). Such Western feminisms

3 When we identified "Positioning Afrika as the Centre" as one of the principles for decoloniality, we used the "k" in Afrika as opposed to "c", to reject the colonial alteration of the word (Madhubuti 1994).

present themselves as “universal phenomenon in ways which disguise its profoundly western concerns and biases” (Mohanty 1991). Consequently, some African feminists and womanists consider “White” women as collaborators, or in the least complicit, with colonialism and neo-colonialism and therefore feel that they cannot be seen as “sisters” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1996).

An example of the way in which Western feminisms continue racist and biased accounts is evident in their orientalist views of Arab women. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Wahab and Al-Issa (2022, 5) argue that there is “a type of ‘feminist washing’ that rests on orientalist principles that Arab and Muslim cultures are incompatible with women’s liberation and democracy (Lloyd, 2014)”. Consequently, Western feminists, social workers included, are quick to condemn Arab governments for their “repression” of women such as in the case of Afghanistan (IASSW 2021) and Saudi Arabia, but say little about European discrimination against Arab women and the oppressions experienced by other minority women as evidenced by restrictions to women wearing the hijab in public places in some European contexts such as France, Germany and the Netherlands (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2021). These characterisations of Muslim women as “victims” results in Western white bodies and liberal feminists denying “racialized women’s agency and political efficacy through attempts to erase postcolonial difference (Korteweg 2017; Orloff and Shiff 2016)” which undermines the possibilities for Arab, Brown and Black women to be agents of decolonial forms of feminisms and womanisms.

At the same time, we recognise that there is no homogenous Black African woman, and that across Afrika and in the diaspora, Black women have had different experiences of oppression (Nkealah 2016) – there is no single story (Adichie 2009). Accordingly, women’s movements among women in various African countries and among African women in the diaspora may have prioritised different aspects of their oppression and empowerment (Hassim 2005; Madunagu 2008; Rasool 2020). These different emphases led to the emergence of for example womanisms, African womanisms, stiwanism, townships feminisms, motherism, snail-sense feminism, nego-feminism, some of which will be briefly described below. Nnaemeka (1998, 5) argues that a pluralism of African feminisms, and we add African womanisms, “captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women’s activism/movements in Africa.”

African feminisms were historically concerned with issues faced by African women on the continent of Africa and the specific issues faced by Black women living on the continent (Nnaemeka 1998; Steady 1981). However, this has changed over time since geographical, racial, and national identities are fluid in this era of globalisation (Lewis 2001). African feminisms also assert the importance of self-definition to challenge stereotypes and inappropriate depictions of African women that have been prevalent in the West historically (Nnaemeka 2004). An example of this negative depiction is evident is the way in which Kipling and other colonialists denigrated African people, as Adichie (2009) points out, that the “tradition of telling African stories in the West

(depicts) . . . Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of . . . Rudyard Kipling, are ‘half devil, half child’.” Which we and others challenge, as these depictions are racist and part of the colonial othering of Black, Brown and Indigenous bodies by colonisers, of the people in the countries they invaded and occupied (hooks 2000).

African feminists have varying views on the modes and means of redressing patriarchy. For example, some non-conforming African feminists use bold and radical mechanisms for challenging systemic sexism, racism, misogyny and colonialism that involve naked protests, profanity and “radical rudeness” (Eltahawy 2020; Nyanzi 2020). These feminists argue that these approaches are necessary to challenge the patriarchy which socialises a woman to “shrink herself” through the policing and suffocation of her voice.

Despite African feminists’ claims about raising the voices of African women and their experiences of gender discrimination, womanists are reluctant to align themselves with feminisms. They argue that both Black and White feminists are using Eurocentric paradigms to solve the issues of Black and African women (Dove 1998). Walker (1984) argues that womanism is committed to issues faced by Black women who do not align with feminism but who are concerned with both gender issues and identity. Womanists articulate the need for African women to self-define based on cultural roots and articulate the need to work in partnership with men to redress their issues of race, class, colonialism and gender (Mekgwe 2008). Oyěwùmí (1997) further posits that notions of gender are not constructed universally in all cultures, and that other aspects such as age are an important mediating factor of power in some African societies.

Africana womanism relates to African women of the diaspora who may have a completely different set of experiences being dislocated from Africa, but still experiencing racism and sexism in other contexts (Hudson-Weems 2019). However, Hudson-Weems’s articulation of Africana womanism does include African women on the continent (Nkealah 2016) although questions of representation and who can and should speak for the subaltern then emerge (Ipadeola 2017). Africana womanism articulates the importance of self-naming and self-definition by African women themselves based on their everyday personal, sociocultural and economic realities (Al-Harbi 2017). This paves the way for renegotiation, “reconsideration and remaking of the African gender construct” (Mekgwe 2010, 193). Hudson-Weems (1993) suggests that self-definition is important for the way in which Africana women define their own realities, according to their own standards. Africana womanists (Hudson-Weems 1997) do not have an adversarial relationship with men but see them as partners who need to be educated about the discrimination women face (Rasool 2019, 2020). They are very clear that men are allies in the struggle against oppression and that issues of race need to be prioritised (Ntiri 2001). Sexism is seen to arise out of race, class and economic prejudices that serve the interests of the powerful elite.

To represent the voices of women who are geographically located in the continent of Afrika, Ogunyemi (1985, 1997) articulated an African womanism, which is distinct from the African American articulation of womanism by Walker and Africana feminism of Hudson-Weems (1997, 2019). Ogunyemi's (1997, 4) African womanism focuses on the voices of African women and the issues faced by women on the African continent such as "interethnic skirmishes and cleansing, . . . religious fundamentalism, . . . the language issue, gerontocracy and in-lawism" among other specific issues that have an impact on the lives of African women. African womanists in Ogunyemi's tradition are reluctant to align with lesbianism and are focused on motherhood as a central feature of African life (Arndt 2000).

In addition to the dominant African feminisms and womanisms mentioned above, a few other types of perspectives that deal with gender and coloniality have emerged in Afrika, in particular West Afrika (Nkealah 2016). We will briefly mention stiwanism, nego-feminism, motherism and snail-sense feminism. Stiwanism was conceived by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994). She argues that Black women's oppression is deeply tied to the structures that oppress women in Afrika based on histories of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism and suggests that Black women's experiences need to account for the impact of and responses to these structures. However, like African womanism it denies lesbian politics and relegates sexuality to the private sphere (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 219). Nego-feminism calls for a negotiation rather than a contestation with patriarchy (Nnaemeka 2004). Nego-feminism it would seem is more aligned with womanisms than feminism, despite the use of the term feminist in its description, owing to its concern with working around patriarchy rather than challenging it, which is similar to snail-sense feminism.

Snail-sense feminism was developed by Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2019) as an approach to deal with the harsh patriarchal nature of Nigerian society through wisdom, resilience and dialogue (Okafor 2021). She suggests that engaging with men requires co-operation, accommodation and tolerance. This theory articulates that women work with men in ways that are intelligent and mature as they use dialogue to deal with patriarchy. These theories are therefore not concerned with directly challenging men's power, but rather working around it or negotiating with patriarchy for space; it is the woman who "negotiates her way around patriarchy, tolerates sexist men, collaborates with non-sexist ones, avoids confrontation with patriarchs and applies diplomacy in her dealings with society at large" (Nkealah 2016, 68). Similarly, motherism accepts the care role for children as embedded in motherhood as a natural role for women.

An important element of African womanisms is the focus on women's position as mother, nurturer in African communities (Mbiti 1969; Okafor 2021) which gives women status. In Acholonu's (1995) conception of motherism, feminism is seen as flawed, as it is seen as not accounting for the strong role that women play in building and keeping families together as mothers in African communities. It is embedded in Afrocentric theories that is "anchored in the matrix of motherhood" (Acholonu 1995, 3).

Okafor (2021) further asserts that mothering gives women in West African communities a powerful role when she says,

An Igbo adage says, *Nwa na-ebunye nwaanyi oche*. Literally, this means that a child gives a woman a seat. Yet, the underlying meaning is that a child gives a woman the right to take full control of her home this way, the woman cannot just do that which pleases her alone rather she satisfies the needs of her child first before hers.

Motherism, Khutia (2020) argues, is embedded in notions of love, especially the love between mother and child which keeps her tied to the family and home. In some ways it seems to misalign with emancipation and entrenches women in the private sphere, thereby ignoring problems such as violence against women in the household (Okafor 2021). It also elevates “the rural woman to the position of a ‘saviour’ in her role as a farm worker and food producer . . . gives and nurtures life, provides it with spiritual nourishment, and imparts to it the ancient wisdom it needs to survive”. Although the centring of rural women is necessary, the role other women may play as mothers are excluded, just as lesbian politics is excluded from many types of womanisms and feminisms as indicated above. As we have seen in drawing on Black African theorisation about gender is the politics of inclusion/exclusion in tension with the problems of theories that are not unable to accommodate for the differential experiences (Nkealah 2016) of women.

We have decided to situate decoloniality within the tradition of the voices of Black African feminisms and womanisms because it is an important way to deal with the coloniality of gender, power, knowledge and being. It is also an important way to deal with the very material ways in which the patriarchy, coloniality and racism are ongoing and affect the socio-economic realities of people’s lives, and more so women’s well-being, with Black African women are disproportionately affected. These concerns speak to the necessity for achieving decoloniality, since ongoing dynamics of coloniality are fully imbricated in women’s oppression. The issue of voice therefore becomes critical in feminist analyses as the question of whose voice is prevalent indicates the location of power. Through highlighting Black African women’s voices in disrupting coloniality in social work, we counter these hierarchies by elevating voices that are usually hidden or obscured. This is similar to the ways in which centring African knowledges reclaims space and changes power relations. However, in centring African knowledges and voices, patriarchal and heteronormative ideas reinforce male power hierarchies that tend to dominate, hence the importance of resisting these tendencies by foregrounding feminist and womanist voices.

The Imperative for Decoloniality in Social Work

Historically, the roots of social work are deemed to be found in Anglo-American, European and Victorian contexts and in conservative theories of eugenics and moral deficiencies among poor people as a dangerous underclass (Abramovitz 1997; Ferguson

and Woodward 2008), which were tied to gender, race and class prejudices. Poor women were specifically blamed for being “breeders” of the dangerous classes and unable to raise children “properly”. Moreover, Black people were specifically seen as being “filthy, careless and indecent” in their home life (Abramovitz 1997, 98). The historiography of social work links these ways of thinking to the colonial project of racist and patriarchal capitalism, reproducing the status quo, and maintaining social control and oppressive knowledge systems (Harms-Smith 2014; Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020; Rasool and Harms-Smith 2021). In countries ruled by the British Empire, the roots of social work arose from the colonial project to perpetuate and maintain the status quo, social control and oppressive knowledge systems (Harms-Smith 2014). Social work therefore faces the same critique as that levelled against psychology, in that it “maintained an androcentric focus and worked to maintain a heteropatriarchal status quo” (Kessi and Boonzaier 2018, 300). It is clear therefore that social work itself, in its entanglement with the colonial project, must account for and seek transformation of its knowledge systems of colonial, masculinist and patriarchal hegemony.

Through critical reflection, action and analysis during a participatory action research process of depth transformation towards decoloniality in a social work education programme, various thematic domains and principles for enabling decoloniality in social work were identified. As part of this process, the participants also engaged with extant writings on decoloniality that developed valuable insights and perspectives for this work (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020; Rasool and Smith 2021). These included critical psycho-political, liberatory, anticolonial, Black and Marxist approaches (Seedat and Suffla 2017) to decoloniality by theorists such as Bulhan (1985), Césaire (2000), Freire (1972), Fanon (1952), Wa Thiong’o (1986), Biko (1987), hooks (1992), Quijano (2007), Maldonado-Torres (2017) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018).

Thematic analysis and reflection on the process of work over 18 months generated the set of seven thematic principles, which were regarded as valuable for prospective engagements around the disruption of coloniality and work towards decoloniality. These principles were positioning Afrika as the centre; analysing power dynamics at every level; committing to an interrogation of the intersections of race, class and gender analysis; maintaining consciousness of structural issues; developing critical conscientisation; privileging the “voice” of the silenced; and embracing ubuntu without arrogating it. This work is a reflexive and ongoing project. It is important to note that although these themes or principles were identified as being distinct, they should be regarded in a holistic manner, as there are congruities and imbrications between them. However, in further interrogating of this work, we realised that inadequate attention had been paid to the scholarship of Black African women in these various domains and therefore the decolonial work was incomplete. In the sections below, we outline each principle briefly and then draw on Black African feminist and womanist work to deepen our understanding of these themes.

Emergent Principles for Decoloniality Work

Centring Afrika (and Black African Feminist Knowledges)

Centring Afrika is an important principle in work towards epistemic decoloniality, if we are to find answers to all the “cultural, political and social questions related to social work theory and practice” (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020, 157). Universalised European and Anglo-Saxon paradigms should not form the basis of all theorising, but neither should there be a tokenistic inclusion and insertion of Black African theorists and so-called indigenisation. Beyond such utilisation of African perspectives characterised as “indigenous”, a critical engagement with hegemonic texts and theorists is required. Afrika must be situated at the centre, such that all knowledges are then deemed to be indigenous to their particular contexts and relevant knowledge from other contexts may be assessed and embraced appropriately (Comaroff and Comaroff 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The quest for epistemic decoloniality will not be possible without “Blackwomencentric” voices and the utilisation of Black feminist epistemological strategies which challenge Western-centric hegemonic claims to authentic knowledge production (Okech 2020). These strategies include recognising the agency of Black women in knowledge production, acknowledging lived experience as a valuable site for interrogation and critique, and the importance of creativities and imagination (Khan 2018). Theories arising from “Blackwomencentric spaces” are energising and able to bring about change in the world as they relate to lived experiences, which is a challenge to notions of theory construction traditionally “under white supremacist capitalist patriarchal logic, where lived experiences assumed to be outside the terrain of knowledge-making” (Gqola 2001, 11). Gqola (2001) calls for an end to the artificial separation between theory and praxis so that there may be a reciprocity between theory and the everyday, which is a powerful way of working in social work a profession that is praxis centred. In this article, we call for the recognition and accentuation of marginalised Black female African voices in social work that are erased and silenced as an important point for disrupting coloniality. However, larger systems of oppression and dominant groups with vested interests work to side-line and suppress these ideas and knowledge-bearing voices of Black women intellectuals. This serves to maintain the status quo and protect elite White male interests (Collins 2000).

Centring African knowledge systems has always been a central feature of Africana womanisms and African feminisms. These schools have proclaimed the necessity for creating spaces for and amplifying the voices of all African women from all spaces. This is imperative because these voices and experiences have often been excluded and ignored in formal histories, decision-making and policies (Fennell and Arnot 2008; Mohanty 1991). It is therefore imperative that Black African feminist thought is foregrounded if work towards decoloniality is to be successful. In fact, Matiluko (2020, 548) argues that true decolonisation is only possible if Black African feminist, and we add womanist, thought is used in university curricula as a decolonial strategy,

as this will mean that “we cease from using the master’s tools, [and so] the master’s house will fall and open spaces for new modes of thought”, which echoes Lorde’s (2018, 101) concern that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Centring Black feminisms in Afrika therefore allows for an “agenda of protest, an agenda of critical thinking” (Govinden as quoted in Khan 2018, 110) that is sorely needed in social work, which is often a profession that reinforces the status quo.

Commitment to Race, Class, and Gender

It is critical that understandings of ongoing oppressions and inequalities of the postcolonial context should include specific attention to the way in which these operate with respect to race, class and gender, as these often intersect and create increased adversity for women (Collins 2000). These oppressions were the dominant forms of violent social control and subjugation by colonial and apartheid systems (Kessi and Boonzaier 2018; Lugones 2010; Ratele 2009; Shefer 2013). Ongoing structural arrangements of, for example, the South African postcolonial and post-apartheid context exert extreme forms of inequality and oppression in these three areas (Shefer 2013).

African feminisms emerged from Black women, pointing out that other forms of feminism did not acknowledge the impact of coloniality and racism on the experiences of Black African women. Steady (1981, 36) argued that a more engaged feminism arose from the experiences of Black African women and that “an actual experience of oppression, a lack of the socially prescribed means of ensuring one’s well-being, and a true lack of access to resources for survival” contributed to the unique experiences of Black African women that were not accounted for in dominant forms of knowledge production. Understanding the experiences of Black African women whose lives are affected by the intersectionality of triple oppressions, provides an opportunity for deconstructing hegemonic narratives and could enhance the social work lens for critical interventions that reconsider dominant frameworks (Crenshaw 2017). However, we also recognise the limitations of intersectionality as a politics of identity that could possibly result in neglecting the politics of redistribution (Fraser 2000) where all discriminations are then regarded as having equal weight irrespective of context. It also risks various oppressions being brought into competition with one another, and risks ignoring the role of the state in perpetuating these oppressions (Ferguson 2008).

The impact of historic racist patriarchal capitalism, landlessness and being Black, poor and woman is ongoing and evident in various South African realities such as land expropriation and brutal evictions from mainly White commercial farms in South Africa (Mzwakali 2019). It is also ongoing and evident in the everyday violence of poverty with Black African women remaining the poorest, especially in rural contexts (Andrews 2018) where regionality intersects with race, class and gender discrimination. Tamale (2006, 40) argues that feminists must understand and analyse neoliberal capitalist social structures and structural adjustment programmes in development which pose a threat to the feminist agenda as they “threaten to roll back our achievements and to silence us into total patriarchal submission”. The recognition of the intersections of race, class and

gender is critical to feminist work; however, in many struggles the focus of class or race to the exclusion of gender has left women behind in social change agendas, and White male voices are replaced with Black male voices for example. Consequently, deprioritising gender is a fatal problem of many liberation movements including the anti-apartheid movement (Rasool 2021b). Similarly, Cunha (2019, 103) states of Mozambique that

Liberation's energies of the ideals of independence seem to be challenged and put into question and the patriarchal abyssal line emerge in its own glory framed by the neo-liberal globalization political economy that requires more and more battalions of disciplined and controlled female bodies and minds.

It is argued that the simultaneity and nexus of these systems of ideological and material oppressions of race, class and gender are brutal in their violence at intrapsychic, interpersonal and physical levels (Sonn, Stevens, and Duncan 2017). We therefore want to emphasise that oppressions of race, class, and gender are expressed in structural systems of patriarchy, capitalism, institutional racism and socio-economic inequalities that are maintained through state social and economic policies in sectors such as education, health and welfare. Fraser (as quoted in Hochfeld 2015, 34) argues that when there is a failure to acknowledge the ideological underpinnings of welfare policies, practices of domination and subordination which reproduce, for example, institutions such as the family and the market and so “they entrench specific interpretations of needs that follow the logic of, respectively, normative domesticity, such as the primacy of male household headship, and the official capitalist economy”. Simultaneously, women are entrenched in care roles, while increasingly playing a role in the productive sphere, with serious implications for their well-being. These further entrench inequalities of class, race, and gender; therefore an intersectional analysis of structures, institutions and policies is required with a clear identification of the needs and issues faced by Black African women and other marginalised groups, such as queer people.

Given the importance of locationality and geography as important predictors of women's experiences, foregrounding Black African feminist and womanist perspectives with regard to these intersections of oppression must be central to any analysis for transformation towards decoloniality.

Consciousness of Structural Dynamics

Work towards decoloniality framed from a structural perspective, regards societal inequities and problems as arising from oppressive and inequitable structural dynamics (Healy 2005; Sakamoto and Pitner 2005). The ongoing structural legacy of colonisation, apartheid and neoliberal economic policies has meant that South Africa remains at the position of the most unequal societies globally (World Bank 2022). Furthermore, in countries such as Palestine where they are still experiencing ongoing coloniality and apartheid, the implications for women and girls are increased since their vulnerability

to gender-based physical and sexual violence, misogyny, sexual harassment and rape from those in power is exacerbated (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Wahab, and Al-Issa 2022).

Hochfeld (2018), through her critical feminist narrative framework, argues that exploration at a micro level exposes the devastating impact of socio-economic insecurities on women, caused by structural and institutional conditions. She further argues that the need for support in the contexts of poverty and disadvantage is derived in the first place from structural relations of deprivation and power. Foregrounding structural issues in decoloniality work therefore implies consistent attention to a structural perspective which sees personal problems such as gender-based violence, rape and care as political issues residing in oppressive and inequitable social structures. This link to the feminist notion of the personal is political (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995), since women's issues have often been relegated to the private sphere which has historically meant that important social issues such as domestic violence and care work have been ignored and swept under the carpet in public policy domains (Rasool 2016, 2017).

Social structures operate and perpetuate inequalities at the domestic, family organisational and societal level, and patriarchy is embedded at all levels of health, welfare, legal, educational and other systems which sublimate women's interests and often ignore women's needs. Mama (2005, 4) urges women to focus on structural issues and argues that although

women are right to be deeply sceptical of the extent to which the patriarchal nation-state can support the liberation of women, feminists are nonetheless continually engaging with the state, demanding rights as citizens in ways that continuously push for redefinitions of the political, and of citizenship, and of culture . . . they are also challenging the manifestations of patriarchal power relations in all aspects of our lives and social institutions.

Despite the marginalisation and silencing of Black African women, they are and have been known to assert their agency through leading various struggles and movements, therefore challenging the systemic oppression of women and other non-conforming bodies at every level (Rasool 2020). This has been particularly evident in South Africa in the fight against gender-based violence, a struggle that the first author and Tessa Hochfeld have been committed to through their positionalities as social work researchers, activists and practitioners. In recent times, young Black women have taken activism further through various ground-up movements such as the Black Womxn's Caucus (2021), with a social worker as one of its leaders. Consequently, work towards decoloniality in the social work context requires a structural perspective even when there is engagement with people at an individual level. Through feminist and womanist movements women and non-conforming bodies are actively challenging patriarchy at the structural level and also the coloniality of gender.

Analysis of Power Relations

We argue elsewhere that “the complexities of asymmetrical power relationships, [are] ever-present in dominant and oppressive contexts of inequality” (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020, 157), and that the home is often one such context where asymmetrical power relations are disguised as normative and expected according to gender. Power enables and perpetuates individual or institutional oppression as a “state of domination where the oppressed suffer the consequences of deprivation, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation” (Prilleltensky 2008, 126). This functions to secure and maintain economic, political, social or psychological control by the elite and ruling classes who hold such positions of power. Such forms of oppression are also evident in the organisation of the nuclear family and most households where the duty of care remains the expectation for women.

With regard to the coloniality of power, Fanon (1952) argues that racist colonisation and oppressive power relationships have an impact at both an intrapsychic and political level, which can also be transposed to gendered power relations. Reverting to a liberal, rights-based approach to deal with power asymmetries therefore creates a tendency to minimise the severity of power hierarchies and inequalities entrenched at various levels (Lewis 2008) and that manifest in gender inequalities. It is crucial therefore that work towards decoloniality include ongoing analysis of power relationships at individual, relational and societal levels with a sharp gendered analysis. It is important to recognise that historically, the process of colonial conquest meant the systematic exclusion of especially Black African women’s voices through “collusion between colonial powers and indigenous male leaders . . . The colonialists were thereby able to incorporate local male leaders within their enterprise to varying degrees, while indigenous male leadership could consolidate power and exclude women from such operations” (Frenkel 2008, 3).

Moreover, the contribution of women in pre-colonised societies that may have been more egalitarian were overturned and replaced with more oppressive patriarchal social structures and power relations in many communities. In spaces where there were women’s voices in tribal councils or especially when they became elders, this became extinct or muted in negotiations and rearrangements of communities during the colonial era. This means that decoloniality of such forms of power must include a political response. In this regard, Tamale (2006) argues that because women’s subordination and oppression is a political issue, African feminists should assert a political agenda to confront powerful patriarchs, irrespective of race.

With respect to the issue of marginalisation and powerlessness, an African feminist perspective argues that the voices of those with the least power with regard to gender, race and class should be heard. Decoloniality of power would therefore include the empowerment and legitimisation of those who are most marginalised; in South Africa this would be women discriminated against because of race, sexuality and location (in

essence Black rural women or Black queer women or Black women with disabilities). Salo (2007, 187) argues that we must interrogate our own positions

in relation to the knowledge/power nexus while making visible both the agentic strategies as well as the constraints of gendered communities and persons who do not have the requisite cultural capital to write their own stories . . . and, we must encourage both subaltern women and men by recognising and legitimating the multiple registers in which they express themselves.

Black African women are usually least powerful in society, and this is exacerbated by other dimensions such as location, sexuality or disability; nevertheless, they are active agents of change and continue at various levels to challenge and resist power in their personal and public capacities.

Social workers need to work towards reigning these acts of resistance and voicing by Black African women into public spheres and must continue to facilitate their access to resources, opportunities for decision-making and influencing power. Social workers have a role to play in both critical conscientisation and education in communities with women, and to enable a rearticulation that embodies a feminist framework for systematic disruption and undoing of patriarchy and the coloniality of gender.

Critical Conscientisation and Rearticulation

Challenging power requires a changed consciousness and since the domain of power “lies in the ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols and ideologies . . . reclaiming the ‘power of a free mind’ constitutes an important area of resistance” (Collins 2000, 285) and reshaping ideas, images, symbols and ideologies to disrupt patriarchy is imperative. Critical conscientisation as the development of understanding about the political and structural realities underlying social reality (Freire 1972) is vital for work towards challenging power, patriarchy and decoloniality. We (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020, 158) argue that through the process of conscientisation “confidence develops to break the ‘culture of silence’ [Freire 1972] enforced by dominant others, thus raising the voice of ‘Black’ perspectives”, and marginalised Black African women’s voices through engagement with them. This is also described as “interrogatory destabilisation” which is a particular form of consciousness raising that critiques “the continuing ideological and material bases for structural forms of violence, inequality, privilege and power” (Stevens, Duncan, and Canham 2013, 186) which is deeply embedded in coloniality, racism and patriarchy through new ways of representation, being, doing and knowing from the ground up.

In some Black African Feminist work, the process of conscientisation is redefined as a process of rearticulation. Collins (2000, 32) argues for a process of infusing existing Black women’s standpoints with new meaning such that Black Feminist thought “can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s every day, taken-for-granted

knowledge . . . Black Feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public, a consciousness that quite often already exists”.

Since many women resist and negotiate oppression at various levels and forms, they are the generators of knowledge, co-constructed and combined from collective experiences, wisdom and storytelling to uncover new meaning and shared ways of being, and of resisting oppression (Collins 2000). Through working with women’s collectives and creating spaces to share lived experiences and ways of living that are counter neoliberal, racist and capitalist ways of engaging the world, women’s narratives pave new pathways for being, doing and knowing that are creative, imaginative and counter hegemony to deal with oppressive power structures.

Voice

No discussion on “voice” is complete without referring to the work of Spivak (1988) who so aptly argues that no one can speak for the subaltern, and therefore it is critical to facilitate voice so that the subaltern can speak for themselves. She argues that “in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 1988, 287). However, it is only through the expression and reassertion of “voice” among groups who are “marginalised and oppressed”, we argue that “normalised” colonialities can be disentangled and overcome in the movement toward the achievement of decoloniality. Where people are able to break silence and have “voice”, this may serve: to give testimony and speak the truth of their lived realities and therefore serve as a political act reaffirming the feminist principle that the personal is political (De la Rey 1997; Hochfeld 2015; hooks 1993; Rasool-Bassadien and Hochfeld 2005), as well as challenge entrenched gendered and racialised power structures (Segalo 2012) that subordinate the subaltern. Voice also helps to process difficult and traumatic events thereby promoting healing (Hochfeld 2015; hooks 1993; Segalo 2012) for individuals and communities who have lived through the violence of coloniality, racism and patriarchy. It can also be a life-affirming experience by which self-determination, self-definition and agency are activated (Nayak 2020).

“Voice” is, however, not always articulated verbally or through language for some groups of women, and yet for other women and many African communities’ histories have been transmitted through the oral tradition. There are nevertheless complexities to verbal and non-verbal articulations of lived experience and both the manner and possibility of expressing content, feelings and experiences for suppressed groups, including women as highlighted by Shiva (1989) in her work. Motsemme (2004, 915) describes the “unspeakability” of systematic dehumanisation, violation and suffering and the way in which “the words we have available become inadequate to the task of conveying the systematic degradations and humiliations experienced, thus rendering victims, survivors and witnesses impotent”. Consequently, forms of expression other than verbal language may be used when the lived realities, struggles and suffering are represented through other forms such as song, dance and even through silence

(Motsemme 2004). The agency, resistance and assertions of Black African women emerge in ways that are not always recognised and that are counter-normative to the “accepted” and status quo ways of engaging and expressing, and therefore need to be featured in more dominant forums. Consequently, “when we reject dominant western oppositional hierarchies of silence and speech, and instead adopt frameworks where words, silence, dreams, gestures, tears all exist interdependently and within the same interpretive field, we find that the mute always speak” (Motsemme 2004, 910).

At times, the work of African feminists revolves around unmasking these hidden narratives and experiences and centring the voices of Black African women who are often the poorest and most excluded. These schools of thought have not only “developed distinctive interpretations of Black women’s oppression but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge” (Collins 1989, 746). Centring the voices and varied forms of expression and assertion of non-conforming rural and other marginalised Black African women in decolonising work is central to understanding alternative and indigenous knowledges and world views.

Ubuntu

The African philosophy and practice of ubuntu (also “botho” or “hunhu”) are centred on the ethical principle of mutuality of caring, concern and well-being of human beings through a collective sense of humanity. This collectivity and mutual responsibility and concern extends to the natural environment of which human beings are a part (Ramosé 2014, 212). However, the hegemony of Western culture and practices through colonisation dominated and denigrated the philosophies, culture and social structures of Black African people. Through colonisation, individualism and materialism associated with Western capitalism and culture had an impact on these traditional beliefs and ways of living (Sekudu 2019). Furthermore, ubuntu has been popularised and appropriated by many Western writers even as a form of “sloganeering” and so it is important that a careful and in-depth perspective that elevates wisdom of the ancestors regarding ubuntu be included in work towards decoloniality. In contrast to universalised individualist theories which premise mainstream Western psychology and social work theory, the holistic African ontology of ubuntu provides an important basis for understanding social work knowledges and practices (Rasool and Smith 2021).

We concur with Mkhize (2018) who suggests that the interdependence and solidarity as articulated by ubuntu is regarded as both a cultural and an ethical principle (Mkhize 2018). Ontologically, this positions a person in relation to others as expressed fully in the saying “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which means that an “individual’s dignity is incomplete, unless it is intertwined with the dignity of fellow human beings” (Mkhize 2018, 39). Mkhize (2018, 29) further argues that conflicts arise between Western conceptualisations of autonomy and “the understanding that the human person is inseparably and dynamically bound to a social and moral community, apart from which personhood is inconceivable”.

However, Simba (2021, vii) challenges this conception of ubuntu using a feminist critique and maintains that “there is a challenge in dislodging male centred tendencies and privileges when ubuntu is prescribed narrowly as a series of observable ethics”. The ambivalence around the concept of ubuntu is found in the reality that it has liberatory and oppressive elements with regard to women (Manyonganise 2015). It is also evident that theorisation and scholarship regarding ubuntu has been dominated by men, who neglected the gender oppressive nature of aspects of ubuntu (Manyonganise 2015), as evidenced by the extent to which women still remain primarily responsible for paid and unpaid care work in the home, family and community (Rasool 2017). Mangena (2009, 17) even more emphatically states that the views of African women are “far from being respected because of the whims and caprices of patriarchy which is camouflaged in the communitarian philosophy of hunhu or ubuntu”.

The gender oppressive elements of ubuntu may be remedied by the perspectives held by womanism and Africana womanism that build on reciprocity and mutuality between men and women. Chitando (2011, 14), in writing about the womanist view, argues that both womanism (Walker 1984) and Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems 2004) “seek to promote the reciprocity of women and men”. She describes the way in which Africana womanism “emphasises power-sharing, complementarity, accommodation, compromise, negotiation and inclusiveness” (Chitando 2011, 16). Simba (2021, vii) furthermore advocates that the narrow interpretation of ubuntu as a set of ethical principles, often occurs along “gendered and engendering lines . . . reproducing set binaries rather than challenging them”. This is especially evident in care where women are mostly responsible for the caring of children, the family and the community. To counter these hegemonic patriarchal tendencies, Simba (2021) argues that interpreting ubuntu in an expanded way as a “framework of encounter informed by a social script” which allows for the rewriting of the social script along the lines of a feminist ethics of care is needed.

It is important therefore that in advocating a principle for work regarding decoloniality, ubuntu should be interrogated and reconstructed using feminist, womanist, Africana womanist and African feminist voices

so that an ethic that has been applauded for its humane-ness cannot be seen to be gender insensitive. An ubuntu or hunhu ethic that is liberative is one that is life-giving to African women both in Afrika and those beyond African borders. (Manyonganise 2015, 7)

It is therefore necessary to disrupt the coloniality of gender through embracing ubuntu imaginatively (Simba 2021) and renegotiating norms and social scripts of relational encounters that reinforce patriarchy and heterosexism. Foregrounding feminist and womanist voices with respect to ubuntu therefore provides greater theoretical depth and meaning with respect to its role in work towards decoloniality.

New Insights: Imagination

While exploring African feminist scholarship in relation to themes about work for decoloniality, we identified an additional eighth principle that was not part of the themes which emerged in the original participatory action process, since this had not incorporated a consciously feminist/womanist analysis. The work of feminists/womanists highlight the role of the imagination as an important part of escaping ongoing colonial hierarchical power relationships, patriarchy and material oppressions of patriarchy. Feminist work suggests that the “invisible work of the imagination can thus be viewed as an act of women’s agency which embodies a potentiality to transform social action” (Motsemme 2004, 925). Disrupting patriarchy and coloniality therefore requires not only material transformation and disruption of the social order from the bottom up (Fanon 1952), but also “the courage and the capacity to imagine the counter-intuitive” (Gqola as quoted in Khan 2018, 116).

Similarly, surrealism or the “permanent readiness for the marvellous” as proposed by Suzanne Césaire (as quoted in Kelly 1999, 6), should be embraced to achieve the overthrow of colonialism and patriarchy. The role of imagination and creativity is described as a “critical, political force” and “underlying the important work of identifying everyday lived experiences as sites of knowledge production that has been central to Black-African feminisms’ creative theorisation” (Khan 2018, 110).

Moving from the bottom up in political education and knowledge production and recognising the value of the everyday struggles, needs and capacities of Black African women to overcome their oppression at various levels, asserts the importance of including feminist and womanist imaginations as the basis for creating change and enabling the surreal. The dominant discourse of women as passive and helpless leaves little room for the possible alternatives that women imagine to counteract patriarchal and other hegemonies. Drawing on the work of Adichie (2009), narratives of African women as victims are problematic as they provide “an almost singular story of abuse and femininity, but this story does not account for the multifarious ways in which women come to make meaning of, resist, and negotiate their positioning” (Boonzaier 2014).

Through imagination, new narratives and possibilities can emerge during times of struggle. Motsemme (2004, 924), in returning to the violent and brutal oppression of apartheid South Africa, describes the way in which imagination opened up “possibilities for women to inhabit a different imaginary . . . [where] different validation processes are at play, which allow women to reimagine, refashion and thus accrue the necessary psychic resources to act in an openly unjust social world”. Motsemme (2004), drawing on the work of Castoriadis (1997), argues that imaginative reconfigurations can play an important part in moments of historical upheaval and “have far-reaching political and social repercussions when they result in the reformulation of cultural narratives, the emergence of new normative ideals and the proposal of alternative ways of organizing social relations”. The creative force of imagination therefore shifts the power dynamics

and embeds in the minds and bodies of women and others who are marginalised the possibilities for resistance and overcoming in ways that facilitate new meaning-making.

Conclusion

Work towards decoloniality, generally, and in social work specifically, requires a depth perspective that accounts for transformative outcomes related to the decoloniality of power, being and knowledge, and for change to the social and economic materiality of ongoing coloniality. Although our work towards decoloniality related to social work education and the findings of the participatory research project revealed critical thematic areas which we articulated as principles that are important to inform such work, what emerged was the recognition that Black feminist and womanist voices were elided and marginalised in discourse on decoloniality.

We therefore thought it was critical to respond to this gap and interrogated the principles that had emerged in work towards decoloniality through the lenses of some Black African feminist and womanist voices that have engaged these. Through articulating these discourses in relation to the seven principles (namely positioning Afrika as the centre; analysing power dynamics at every level; engaging in an analysis of interlocking forms of oppression, namely race, class and gender; maintaining consciousness of structural issues; developing critical conscientisation; privileging the “voice” of the silenced; and embracing ubuntu without arrogating it), with the addition of “imagination”, this work challenges patriarchy and the coloniality of gender.

These voices provide an expanded theorisation about the principles for work on decoloniality, and introduced the importance of disrupting the coloniality of gender and patriarchy as necessary and inherent in the decolonial project. Each principle was interrogated and inscribed with new understandings and elaborations from the voices of African feminists and womanists as summarised below. However, these principles have a connectedness and continuity, which are better considered holistically.

Centring Afrika in work of decoloniality must include centring epistemological theorisation of “Blackwomencentric voices”. Although at some level developing critical conscientisation is necessary for this, for many women a critical conscientisation of their encounters and positions in relation to oppressions already exists and needs to be expressed and articulated through alternative forms of knowledge production, hence critical conscientisation should be expanded to include rearticulation. The expression of the “voice” of those marginalised, often consisting of the unspeakable owing to the extent of suffering involved, should therefore also occur in ways that are counter-normative and in opposition to Western understandings of legitimate content and platforms, such as art, song, poetry dance and other creative or non-verbal means of articulation.

Similarly, the philosophy of ubuntu should interrogate the ways in which the ethical and philosophical principles of ubuntu do not counteract patriarchy. Articulations of ubuntu need to expand to challenge the normative social scripts of relational encounters aligned with a feminist ethics of care (Simba 2021). Analysing power relationships at every level with a focus on the ways in which these relations subordinate women's interests is therefore necessary to dismantle patriarchy, even in cultural constructions and philosophies such as ubuntu.

Foregrounding structural dynamics highlighted the extent to which women's issues such as gender-based violence and care work reside in inequitable social structures at every level of society. Recognising the extent to which women's issues such as care and gender-based violence have been marked as personal, elucidates the importance of politicising them from the core of social structures in which they are embedded. Specifically, in considering race, class and gender, there should be a feminist analyses of neoliberal capitalist structural forces that threaten the feminist agenda and support patriarchy.

Finally, and critically, through the exploration of African feminist and womanist voices, an additional principle for work around decoloniality was incorporated, namely, the importance of the counter-intuitive and imagination for creativity and knowledge production which embraces surrealism as the permanent readiness for the marvellous. This principle encourages envisioning new ways of being, thinking and doing, in addition to alternative forms of creating a gender-just society that disrupts the coloniality of gender.

We recognise, however, that despite attempts to be inclusive of a variety of African feminist and womanist voices, there are many important African feminist and womanist voices that are still not represented as we cannot speak for the subaltern. In particular, we could not adequately capture the voices of young Black rural African women, queer Black African women, Black African women with disabilities, and those who do care work for others or for their families, who in the South African context represent some of those considered the subaltern. It is when the non-academic, everyday voices of these subalterns are centred, that coloniality, patriarchy and racism will be disrupted. We therefore recognise the need for subaltern voices to be elevated and elucidated. Perhaps this is better done in spaces where academics are not dominating the discourse and speaking for others. Acknowledging these limitations and finding ways to overcome them using the tools of imagination are critical for the disruption of the patriarch and coloniality of gender.

In social work, work towards decoloniality must include these voices, experiences and knowledges as they need to lead in developing policy and practice for the transformation of ongoing coloniality and its pernicious forms of patriarchy and racism. Imaginative and feminist philosophies, ethics and strategies for undoing such power relations are critical through infusing principles for work towards decoloniality with Black African

feminist and womanist voices. As authors, we hope that by situating these traditions loudly and clearly, the coloniality of gender will be accounted for more consistently in work towards decoloniality. It is also through these voices that we were able to expand on the original themes identified, thereby contributing to the reinvigoration of the project of decoloniality in social work in more powerful, empowering and imaginative ways.

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