

The Political Economy of Knowledge Production, Conjugal Slavery and its Stakes in Africa

This 5-day CSiW Institute hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand brought together scholars, activists, and community researchers to discuss the political economy of knowledge production and conjugal slavery during and post-war in Africa. Its innovative community-led approach to understanding the ways we draw on familiar epistemologies to produce new ways of thinking about enslavement, conflict and forced marriage in Africa highlighted the methods of and ethical reasons for different approaches, as well as the role they play in supporting and/or challenging asymmetries and inequalities in knowledge production in the Global North and South.

The conference opened with a speech by Professor Muchaparara Musemwa, Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. He movingly reminded his audience how pivotal these issues are and how they shape the stakes of our lives today. In his view, such research is crucial to understand the longevity of conjugal slavery, and the ways its materiality and constitutive knowledges contribute to the political, economic, social life of the whole African continent. He stressed the need for researchers to write and speak about these thematics (slavery, conjugal slavery, forced marriage, Africa) ethically and responsibly to bolster the dignity and subjectivity of those who have gone through wars and conflicts. The received wisdoms within our disciplines should not be taken for granted, he said, but questioned to determine their relevance to scholarship. He enumerated some of the crucial questions informing the conference. How do we explore the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of our subjects of study? What is the politics of how we produce bodies of knowledge? And of course, the whole conference grappled with the question of ethics, as it cannot be “disentangled from the question of power.”

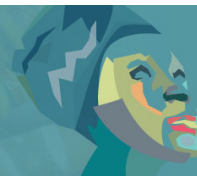
Professor Musemwa argued that the socio-political and historical production of such research situates and implicates the researcher as a subject constituted in the relationship between researchers and objects of study globally. Such linkages of knowledge and power are intimate and consequential; arriving at an understanding of this linkage is crucial to any attempt to formulate political theory of knowledge and its production including the politically grounded examples discussed during the conference. Finally, he reminded conference attendees that the thematics of the Institute are pivotal in the production of a certain form of knowledge independent of the politics and institutional configurations of their various disciplines. This positions social sciences and humanities at the core of public debates informing public policy.

Attending to the different ways in which patterns of enslavement, conflict, and marriage in sub-Saharan Africa are explained and understood, was at the core of the whole conference which took place in French and English (with simultaneous translations). Language was thus at the forefront of how we produce and circulate ideas, and with what effect in the multiplicity of communities that are impacted by such phenomena.



The CSiW network of university and community-based researchers and practitioners came together to engage with forced marriage in war in six countries: the DRC, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Drawing extensively on first-hand research, interviews, participant observations, creative artistic and poetic methods, surveys, archives, and policy documents, the presenters grappled with the need to not only avoid taking for granted familiar methods in our work but also to articulate new ones that allow for deeper conversations and for understanding the role of dominant methods for research into patterns of gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict settings in Africa.

The first-day presenters focused on producing different forms of knowledge, ranging from anthropological, perspectival, artistic, and ethnographic to legal. They discussed the production of such knowledges, articulated ethical approaches to redress violence, and noted the dramatic consequences of conjugal slavery in the everyday lives of survivors. Colleagues carrying out research with children born of war and Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria, argued that our knowledge production is not neutral but depends on the development of relationships with our interlocutors; attending to their needs and their understanding of which questions and what issues/phenomena ought to be taken seriously. These colleagues suggested the researcher is not independent of the subjects and communities



of their study. Rather, researchers are faced with an ethical dilemma when thinking and investigating conjugal slavery and forced marriage in Africa. According to the panellists, if we are serious about fighting conjugal slavery and forced marriages and their consequences in the contemporary moment, we must understand the risks faced by the people we are trying to work with – what they might be able to say without punishment or other political consequences and/or whose testimonies, photos, insights and ways of being could appear in our writings. Working with African communities compels researchers to challenge geopolitical developmental unevenness and notions of enslavement and white gendered supremacy, as well as to prioritize the safety of those enslaved or forced into marriage.

The stories behind the story were central topics of conversation. Scholars and experts from different organizations discussed what kinds of knowledge ought to be produced and how it ought to be used and disseminated. For example, the panel on producing and using legal knowledge highlighted the importance of producing knowledge, understanding how it can be used to eradicate forced marriages during war, and bringing together different communities to identify and pursue shared goals.

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The second-day participants spoke of creative ways to align advocacy and research. Drawing on in-depth interviews and poetic work (i.e., art) with survivors of sexual enslavement during war, panellists addressed what it means to do research which can be extensively used to advocate for the eradication of violence and the achievement of justice. Providing insights from their research on children born of genocide and their work with communities, members of the second and third panels grappled with the implications of their work on forming and reconfiguring research questions. For these panellists, it is not enough to articulate questions independent of the spaces within which violence took place and without considering the ongoing concerns of survivors. They also addressed the conference's larger question on methodologies. They pointed out that methodologies and methods are not geopolitically neutral. The researcher must not only collect and write out the "data." He/she must also ask questions and make choices about methodology including the deployment of creative and poetic approaches to



understand how these "choices" and the global power/capital dynamics shape what is going on in different sites.

More significantly, the panellists raised questions about the audiences and the conversations that emerge in different communities and how these become the target of research. For instance, if an individual is researching conjugal slavery and Boko Haram in armed conflict in Northern Nigeria, she/he may want to ask the following questions: Who is the research for? What are the legal and ethical aspects of research in Nigeria? What is the space and time within which the enslavement by Boko Haram takes place? Boko Haram cannot be the sole subject of research in conjugal slavery; all the domestic/international (i.e., corporations) parties must be included. They also noted the importance of perspective, as perspective may cause a researcher to define the major issue too narrowly, excluding other vantage points. For example, if conjugal slavery is defined as a domestic rather than an international issue, the researcher is ignoring international law and the implications it may have on the definition of and approach to conjugal enslavement as well as the possibilities for reparations and other forms of justice. More so, these definitional punctuations elide larger corporate entanglements, thus preventing an inquiry into the nature of global gendered and racialized politics within and beyond the African continent.



On the third day, the conversation revolved around the historical configuration of slavery and its constitutive element as a certain form of knowledge entangled with power. Panellists highlighted the longer trajectory of slavery and the importance of history in the investigation of current forms of slavery and enslavement and Africa. This historical trajectory is both descriptive and analytical, they reminded us, and the current engagement with



enslavement and forced marriage has to grapple with established power dynamics and normative patterns of knowledge. This kind of insight allows researchers to understand that the emergence of forced marriages and enslavement have sedimented power dynamics that ought to be understood when carrying out interviews, participant observations, or archival research. A few panellists asked: What if present expressions of enslavement and conjugal slavery are entangled with histories of gendered and racialized patterns of enslavement? These effects of slavery and the complicated configurations in the current moment cannot be ignored or made invisible by researchers.

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On the last day at the final roundtable, panellists concluded with some crucial insights into the political economy of knowledge production and its entanglement with power in Africa. In addition to raising questions about the colonial and national archives and the forms of violence they exhibit, they queried the ways we



write history. They noted how important it is to prevent writing from committing more violence. How can we avoid condemning subjects to being invoices, and units of investment and value? How can

stories or historiography avoid redeeming exploitatively the dead within the dominant frames of Eurocentrism, racism, anti-blackness, and the market? Linking the production of stories and the historiography of slavery and enslavement and its violence to the market is co-constitutive of the violence that comes with capital and, thus, cannot take us very far. Equally important is how dynamics of conjugal slavery and enslavement are informed and shaped by colonial moments and abolitionist struggles.

The panellists' emphasis on history was complemented by their engagement with the production of knowledge about enslavement and forced marriage during war by those within the Global South. The last panel section highlighted the positionality

of funders and researchers, as well as geopolitical vantage points, in understanding slavery, enslavement, forced marriage, and Africa. Research from the vantage point of the enslaved, from the vantage point of Africa, from those forced into conjugal



slavery, and from the Global South must challenge global dominant knowledges and ideas about the world; such research must acknowledge scholars from Africa, Africa as a site of global knowledge, and their contribution to such knowledge and

our fields more generally. The scholars in this panel grappled with what it means to allow space for knowledges co-constituted with white researchers while allowing more space for black scholars to produce ideas on an equal footing. While research in the field demands we pay close attention to positionality, such as gender, age, race, class, dis/ability, its undertaking is not a given. Playing with politics in different sites is pivotal; it pushes the researcher to realize/rupture dominant notions of her/his role. Research should not be about the usurping of ideas and insights for the researcher's power but about the enhancement and development of an egalitarian "social organization of life."

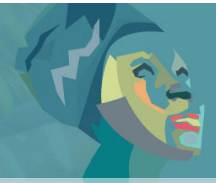
More significantly, these series of panels highlighted the role of the research and the researcher in not evading marginal voices but rather going out of their way to identify them and integrate them in a sensitive manner in their work by attending to the funders and the relational dynamics within which such projects are undertaken. Carrying out research from the Global South demands the researcher attend to the geopolitical power relations, including unevenness in questions of funding and institutional hierarchies that inform and shape who is structurally central, marginalized, or relegated to conditions of violence, in terms of enslavement and research. A Global South research approach to and production of knowledge looks out for those historically and contemporaneously left out either due to a lack of access to resources or institutional hierarchical positionalities of power. Instead of taking these structures for granted, ethically and politically, researchers need to account for them and challenge them, not simply reinforce them.

Finally, panellists noted that this conference allowed African researchers and researchers from the Global North to look at each other closely. While there is structural unevenness in positions whether one is from a certain site of the African continent or the Global South, these researchers stressed that "we" enter the conversation to forge collaborations and knowledge networks that allow for the development of



CONJUGAL SLAVERY IN WAR

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conditions that is conducive to research toward social justice for the communities the CSiW partnership serves. The final session focused on the multiple ways knowledge from different sites and from different hierarchically positioned researchers is used by researchers in Africa and the Global North, social media, and policy in ways that fail to cite and account for their contributors. Some researchers highlighted that their subjects of study felt exploited, and public stories did not result in the reparations and changes they deemed crucial. They urged us to take seriously the agency, positionality and the advocacy of multiple voices in the work we do. The stakes of the political economy of knowledge are the stakes about social life, the conditions that inform and shape it, and ultimately, the shaping of a world otherwise that enslavement and forced marriages are not its primary strategies and mechanisms of power.

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