

Family Planning in Francophone West Africa: *Issues and opportunities for the women's movement*

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Introduction

- Brief background about gender equity/equality, girls & women's empowerment through education
- Education plays a key role in both FP & empowerment
- WA lags behind all other regions in FP due to a host of factors (gender inequality, culture, religion, poverty, marital status, etc.)
- Women in West Africa have contributed to better FP
- A gendered approach to FP is necessary: specific role and needs for women & men



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FP-EDUCATION-EMPOWERMENT LINK

- FP increases girls' chances for **further education** (beyond elementary)
 - Lower dropout rates due to unplanned pregnancy
- Assumption that schooling positively correlates with better FP
 - Educated women/girls can **access** & make sense of FP information
- Enables women/girls to make **better decisions** about procreation
 - Freedom of choice + fewer unintended pregnancy that stop schooling or work
- Facilitates women's participation in the **labor market**
 - Increased earnings + improved SES
- Fewer children → more time to dedicate to non-domestic pursuits
 - More time for self-realization activities



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Women's Contribution to FP Progress in WA

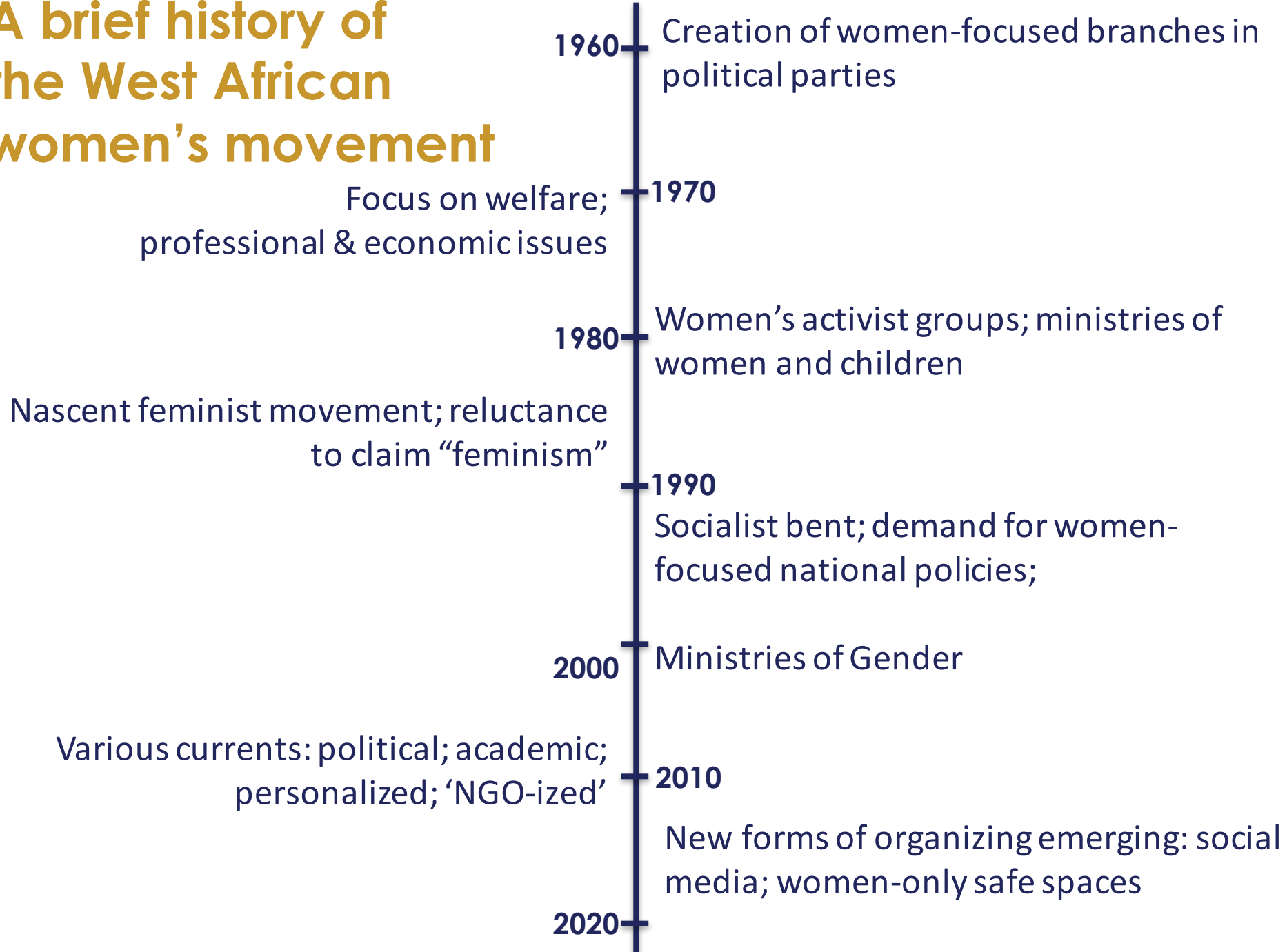
- Influenced change for family planning and reproductive health **laws/policies**.
- Women **parliamentarians** → crucial role in changing arcane RH colonial legislation (i.e. **Togo** adopted new laws in **2006**)
- Evolution in **cultural/religious** perceptions of FP
- Rallying men to the cause through partnership and persuasion



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A brief history of the West African women's movement



Academic Contribution

Female academics in the region have contributed to:

- Theorization & gender analysis congruent with African women's lived realities & priorities
- Feminism that critiques Western notions of womanhood as it relates to the "other"
- Conceptualize FP as an **empowerment tool** and a **right** for women (although did not gain much traction in the region)



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Key Role of Women's NGO/CSO

- Most NGOs/CSOs in the region have taken a pragmatic approach to FP by eluding/downplaying **abortion & rights demands** and championing FP and access to contraception as:
 - A **health issue**
 - A **means to reduce infant mortality**
 - A tool for birth spacing to **protect mother and child**
- Community advocacy, awareness campaigns, policy influencing etc. are squarely placed within the global agenda (MDGs/SDGs and myriad declarations about RH)
- Contributed to progressive acceptance of FP



Emerging Forms of Women Organizing

- Women have taken **social media** platforms by storm
→ opportunities for engaging large numbers of women in FP/reproductive health and rights campaigns
- Non ideological, women-only “safe spaces” in which women affirm their “personhood”, rights, aspirations, and can “organize around a cause and influence authorities”
 - *Ex: Ladies Club Senegal, Sama Jëkër Sama Xarit* in Senegal (i.e. LCS cancer campaign)



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Heeding the Diversity of Views on FP

- Hard to reconcile the contrasting perspectives
- While it is important to promote FP programs as needed for women's reproductive health, empowerment, economic participation and autonomy
 - It is equally crucial to recognize that myriad African women and men of various persuasions do not wholeheartedly believe that FP is a panacea for Africa's development problems.

It's been argued that "African feminism" values/glorifies **motherhood/fertility**

“The debate in many Western countries about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism are not characteristics of the new African Feminism. Rather, the slowly emerging African Feminism is distinctly heterosexual, **pro-natal and with many bread, butter, culture and power issues.”**

Gwendolyn Mikell, 1997

African Feminism, the Politics of Survival in SSA



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Looking forward

- **Multi-sectoral** policies
- Meaningful **dialogue with interest groups**, including women's groups, men, religious and opinion leaders, and youth advocates
- **Gendered approaches** to policies / programs that highlight men's roles in ensuring FP progress
- Culturally and age appropriate **gendered sexual education** focusing on youth
- Disseminate culturally appropriate information (**IEC**) - **campaigns** and outreach



New directions

- Effective use of **social media** can sustain progress by providing a way to:
 - Access female-only spaces and leverage already-organized interest groups
 - Reach youth with tailored educational information
 - Empower youth to conduct peer education and become advocates
 - Establish and maintain men and boys as active stakeholders (**polygamy** very present in WA region)
 - Ouagadougou Partnership plays a key role in leveraging gains from past decades



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Thank you!

Merci!