

*“Feminism is an Alien Concept in  
Kenya”*

Negotiations around Feminism among Young, Middle  
Class Women in Nairobi

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# Abstract

This thesis is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork among young middle class women in Nairobi, and focuses on their negotiations concerning the concept of feminism and feminist identities. It discusses what life is like for a young woman in Nairobi, and how class position affects one's agency and abilities, and possibly also one's view of feminism.

Furthermore, this thesis focuses on how the concept of feminism is being problematized in the context of Nairobi, and how some women find it difficult to identify with it. I argue that this reluctance towards feminism is not rooted in a general resistance towards women empowerment, but rather has to do with the concept's 'Western' origin and negative connotations. In addition, I discuss how feminist identities at work here are fluid, contextual and can be problematized in certain settings, both by society and by the feminist herself.

Moreover, this thesis discusses how the women who do identify as feminists are emphasizing the need for an 'African feminism', one that accounts for their particular struggles and aspirations. They are thereby continually negotiating and developing their feminist identities so that it fits the specific context they find themselves in. I investigate how young women within a creative network in Nairobi are pushing feminism forward through, among other things, a practice I label performative feminism. They are highly inspired by global flows and trends, and are expressing their feminisms through their creative content and social media. I argue that these women might function as feminist role models, contributing to an effort of normalizing the concept. In addition, I discuss how feminist identity can affect young women's views of their own sexuality, and their relationships to men. I also look at the negotiation of masculinities, and men's views of feminism and gender equity, and arguing that an understanding of men's views is crucial to fully understand women's positions, too. Finally, one of the main arguments throughout this thesis is the importance of intersectionality and of an emphasis on the social and historical context in the study of feminism and feminist identities.

## **Keywords:**

Feminism, Intersectional feminism, Gender, Globalization, Urbanity, Class, Consumption

*“I would like to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently (...)” (Adichie, TED Talk 2013)*

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I am eternally grateful for all the strong women in my life, who have shaped me, sparked feminist fires within me, and who keep inspiring everyone around them to prosper. Particularly, my mother, Eli and my two sisters, Aina Ebube and Madly Onyinye. You are the perfect role models.

Last, but absolutely not least, I want to express my sincerest gratitude to all the wonderful, inspiring and kind men, but especially women, I had the pleasure of meeting in Nairobi. You shared your lives, your insights and your love with me - it has been an honour. I have tried my best to portray you as the strong, fierce and passionate women you truly are, any portrayal indicating otherwise is entirely my own wrongdoing.

*Asante Sana.*



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# Introduction

*“Ida! Don’t mention that word to your informants! Feminism is an alien concept in Kenya, and it will not be well taken if you use that word.”*

It was my third day in Nairobi and I was meeting with a bureaucrat official to talk about the research I was about to conduct. I entered his office and saw a big man, somewhere in his fifties, with a fancy suit on, sitting behind an enormous desk. He greeted me with a handshake, but did not look like he had the time nor the interest to talk to me. I started telling him about my research topic and what I wanted the focus to be, and all the while, he kept answering calls and continually interrupting me. Then when I, in a half-sentence, mentioned that I was interested in how the concept of feminism was viewed among young middle-class women, I all of a sudden had his full attention. He raised his voice, responding in the words quoted above. He did not think it would be wise of me to focus my research on feminism and his opinion was that it did not exist in Nairobi or Kenya. I remember sitting there, speechless, feeling my confidence shrinking with each second that passed. I walked out of his office thinking that my research was doomed and I had better find something else to study. Then again, this man could be living proof that the presumably male dominated society I was about to study was very much in existence - with or without the presence of feminism. Moreover, as this thesis will show, his statements reflect the controversy surrounding the concept of feminism in Nairobi.

## Aim of the thesis

This thesis is an ethnographic account of young, middle class women in Nairobi and how they interpret, negotiate and enact the concept of feminism in an urban setting. It discusses what life is like for young women in Nairobi, how class determines their possibilities and agency, and possibly also their views of feminism. I argue that the reluctance to identify as a feminist often is rooted in the concept’s ‘Western’ origin and the negative connotations attached to the word. Furthermore, I will show how feminist identity is contextual and often problematized, both by the feminist herself, but also by society. This thesis will also show that the women who do identify with feminism and/or as feminists are continually negotiating and developing their own forms of feminisms that accounts for their specific context and struggles. I will also

discuss how young women within a creative network in Nairobi are setting the agenda and pushing forward new trends, and might thereby be functioning as feminist role models. Moreover, I investigate how young women's feminist identities have an effect on their sexuality, relationships and their views on men in their lives. In addition, I argue that a focus on how young men view their own 'masculinities', women's position in society and feminism, is crucial to understand a male dominated society as a whole. My argument here is that an African city such as Nairobi does not exist in a vacuum, but is highly inspired by what is happening elsewhere in the world, which makes it unavoidable to discuss feminism in relation to globalization. Finally, the overall aim of this thesis is to highlight and empirically emphasize the importance of a focus on intersectionality in the study of feminism and feminist identities.

I always knew that I wanted to conduct fieldwork in an African country, partly because of my own background as half-Nigerian, but also because of a long-standing passion to defy stereotypes about 'Africa', as a homogenous place, reduced to despair. As Ferguson puts it, "*Its people appear as victims many times over: victims of poverty, of war, and above all of AIDS – all the modern plagues that seem to have a kind of perverse affinity for the African continent*" (2006: 8). I wanted to conduct an urban ethnography and therefore chose the metropolitan of Nairobi. A number of ethnographic accounts relating to women or gender from East-Africa tend to focus on the rural areas and/or on HIV/AIDS (for example Abwunza 1997, Talle 1988, Booth 2004). While this is both interesting and important, there seems to be a lack of ethnographic accounts that feature the young, urban, African woman (for exceptions, see for instance Spronk 2012). Thus, with this thesis, I want to be part of a larger effort to change this narrative.

## Historical background

To understand young, Kenyan, middle class women's lives and their understandings and enactments of feminism, it is crucial to also have an understanding of the country's history of colonization and of women's position during and after independence. Furthermore, an outline of the feminist movement's origin of the and different waves over the past hundred years is needed to comprehend the contemporary feminism that young women in Nairobi relate to.

## Colonial rule, independence and women's position

Kenya was colonized by Great Britain until they gained independence in 1963. The country then elected Jomo Kenyatta as their first president and Kenya became a republic in 1964. (Ochieng 1990: 200-206). There were several nationalist movements pushing for Kenya's independence, but the most significant one might be the *Kenya African Union* (KAU). Daniel Sifuna argues that the success of Kenya's independence is largely due to the growing number of Kenyans with higher education in the 1940s and 50s, which created an emerging elite, ready and capable to overthrow the colonial system (1990: 193). KAU was primarily lead by Jomo Kenyatta, but there was a divide within the party between the moderates and the radicals. The moderates, which Kenyatta affiliated with, wanted to gain independence through peaceful means and cooperation with the British, whereas the radicals wanted rapid change, and formed the Mau Mau movement that could lead a rebellion against colonial rule. The rebellion and rising resistance forced the British to grant Kenya their own representative government. Sifuna writes that both the Mau Mau movement and KAU consisted mainly of people from the Kikuyu tribe (1990: 196). One of the reasons they were at the frontline of the fight for independence was because of their geographical location, close to Nairobi, which was then a colonial settler city (Sifuna 1990: 196). The Kikuyu tribe is up to this day seen as the richest and most powerful one in Kenya, and the current president of Nairobi is Jomo Kenyatta's son, Uhuru Kenyatta.

Ahlberg (1991) has studied how the colonial domination had an effect on women's lives in Kenya, and argues that one of the main colonial policies was to dismantle cultural values and establish a colonial economy. This meant that the majority of Kenyan males had to migrate to the urban areas (mainly Nairobi) and to European plantations to work. The women did not have any right to work neither domestically nor on the plantations. (Ahlberg 1991: 73-74). In 1948 there were approximately 23 354 men and only 5535 women living in Nairobi (Sorrenson 1967), and the few women in the city were either divorced, widowed or not capable of having children. Furthermore, the missionaries, governed by the British, prohibited several practices and customs, which had been established to define male/female relationships and sex and reproduction (Ahlberg 1991: 74-77). The missionaries enforced Christian beliefs of family life and ideas of gender, which were based upon particular patriarchal notions (Spronk 2012: 54). Spronk argues that these ideas were not present in Kenya prior to colonization and that "*The spread of Christianity, together with capitalist processes, has led*

*to a conceptual and moral redefinition of gender roles, sexuality and relationships between women and men”* (2012: 54). Moreover, women were largely excluded from the public sphere and denied education and formal work during colonialism. Thus, one could argue that the way women are viewed in contemporary Kenya is a result of colonial structures and ideas, which are still present today.

Furthermore, since the ones who took over in 1963 were part of a small elite, educated by the British, they kept enforcing many of the same regulations. In many ways, this Kenyan elite took the colonial rulers' place in Nairobi; they moved into the previously predominant white neighbourhoods and succeeded them in their jobs (Aseka 1990: 64-65). Spronk (2012), who conducted research among young professionals in Nairobi during the turn of the last century, writes that there is little literature on the generation of 'white-collar workers' who were part of the middle class after independence. However, based on conversations with her informants' mothers, who grew up during that time, she states that *“there was a significant change, compared with their own mothers, in terms of autonomy, lifestyle and an egalitarian conjugal bond”* (Spronk 2012: 58). These women were able to work in commerce or the public sector. Thus, the lives of the women who were part of what developed into the middle – and upper classes of Nairobi were relatively good in the years after independence. Spronk argues that every generation during the last century lived a life that was novel or progressive at that time, characterised by rapid changes in terms of gender identities (Spronk 2012: 58).

My informants expressed the same sentiments, comparing themselves to their mothers' generation. Many of them explained how their parents moved to Nairobi to work when they were young, and that they were the first of their family's generation to be born there. They also talked about stories they had been told of how life was like for their grandmothers, and emphasized that it definitely was easier now, in present day Kenya. Regardless, as this thesis will show, this does not mean that my informants felt that the fight for gender equity was a battle already won.

### Waves of 'Western' feminism

To understand negotiations of contemporary feminism in Nairobi, it seems necessary to give a brief outline of feminism's history and origin in the 'West'. The feminist movement is commonly referred to by categorizing it into waves, though it is worth mentioning that the views of the feminist movement's history are countless, and what is presented here is only

one of many. The first wave of feminism is characterized by the fight for women's right to vote at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – towards the 20<sup>th</sup> century, carried forth by two movements; by liberals and the working class (Holst 2009: 46-47). The second wave occurred after the Second World War, in the 1960-70s, and was characterized by an uprising against women's restriction to the domestic sphere; as 'homemakers'. A high number of women were attaining higher education at that time, and were fighting for women to become more visible in the public spheres of society. During this period, the notion of "radical feminism" was born, which refers to a subgroup of feminists, claiming that "the personal was political". (Holst 2009: 50). They were criticizing the liberal feminists for not accounting for the patriarchal society as a social system that favours men over women, but only concerned with women's freedom of choice to live their lives. In many ways, the different subgroups of feminism that emerged in Europe and The United States in the 1960s and 70s reflected the social and class bound positions of different women. (Friedman, Metelerkamp, Posel 1987: 8).

Then, finally, there is the third wave of feminism, a moment during which no one seems to agree on simply defined movements or achievements. Holst writes that this 'wave' is characterized by a feminist movement that is becoming more theorized, and an increased focus is put on topics such as post-colonialism, race and the social construction of gender (2009: 55). In the United States, scholars of colour, like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) among others, began theorizing and criticizing the feminist movement. bell hooks (2000) argues that during both the first and the second wave of feminism in the United States, little or no attention was paid to the struggles black women face, who are forced to encounter several oppressions simultaneously; racism, classism and sexism, what today is commonly referred to as intersectional feminism. Thus, the focus on the oppression of women of colour and of what is commonly referred to as 'Third World women' began towards the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today. Moreover, contemporary feminism is characterized by transnational practices, where new versions of the concept are spreading globally as a result of digital media, travelling and feminist networking, to name a few (Walby 2011: 64). In addition to a focus on intersectionality, Judith Butler's writings, such as her influential *Gender Trouble* (1990), has stood at the forefront of the discourse surrounding gender as a non-essential, fluid performance. This supposed third wave is often referred to as a post-feminist era: whereas the previous focus was on identifying sameness among women, the current focus is to emphasize the differences (Holst 2009: 56). I will go into more detail on theory concerning intersectionality and the spread of feminism in chapter one.

## Post-colonialism and women's movements

The brief outline of the feminist movement's history presented above has mostly focused on developments in Europe and the United States. A focus on feminism in relation to colonialism is therefore necessary in this regard. In Kenya, white women gained the right to vote long before native women did, respectively in 1919 and 1957 (Holst 2009: 63), and there was not much attention paid to black women's rights during the first nor second wave of feminism.

Friedman et al. writes that "*many of the revolutionary movements of the third world fighting for national liberation from colonialism or imperialism and/or working towards a transition to socialism, have adopted a women's programme.*" (1987: 20). There was hence a tendency to assume that female subordination would end with the transition to socialism, and women's liberation, was seen as secondary to the nation's liberation (Friedman et al. 1987: 20).

Nevertheless, there was a focus on empowering women in the years after independence. In the 1970s, the government, in cooperation with external actors focusing on development, formalized different women's groups to empower women, thereby empower the country in general (Ahlberg 1991: 95-96). Even though this may have been done in the name of feminism from the western agents' point of view, feminism was not a concept used in the Kenyan context.

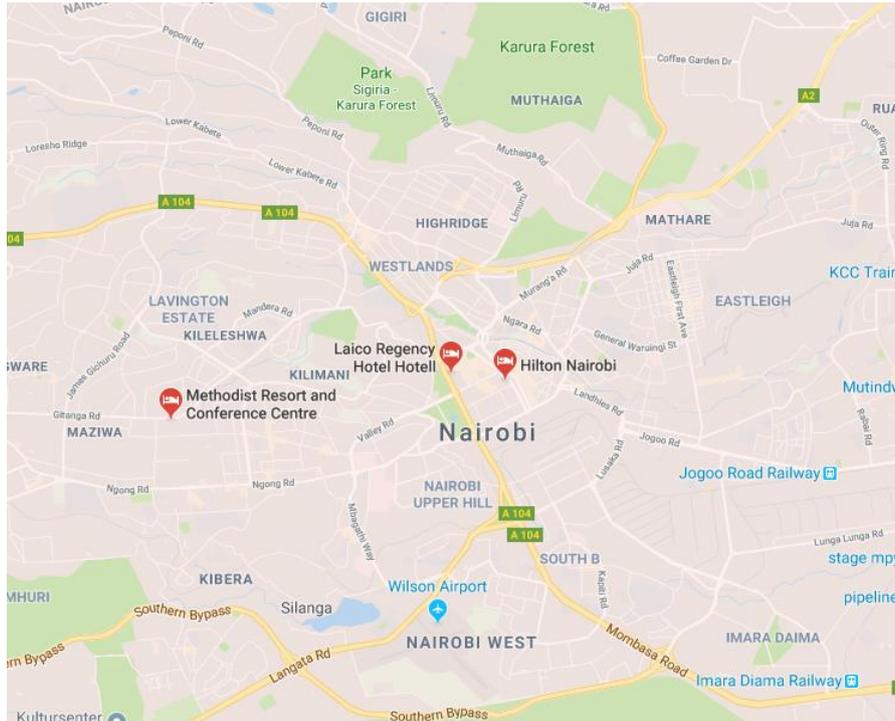
This historical background, both of Nairobi and Kenya's experience with colonialism, the western feminist movement, and women's movements in Kenya, is meant to give the reader a context and a backdrop for an understanding of what might affect young women's views of feminism in contemporary Nairobi. My informants expressed quite a lot of anger towards colonialism and post-colonial structures that still affect Kenya today, and as we shall see, the reluctance towards adopting western ideas and practices often stems from this anger. Before embarking on methodology and the theoretical frameworks and discourses this thesis is utilizing, I will give a brief description of present day Nairobi and the construction of the field that I chose.

## The city of Nairobi

*My first day alone in Nairobi. I have been trying to walk around my neighbourhood a little bit, but everyone is just looking at me strangely, it is apparently obvious that I am not from here - even though my skin colour is not too far from theirs - and that I have no idea what lies around the next street corner. (Field notes, January)*

The text above perhaps makes clear that the transition into the field was no walk in the park. Arriving all on your own in a big city you know nothing about, in a country and a continent you have never been to before, is not easy. To someone who does not know the city, Nairobi might seem to have no structure or no system whatsoever. Yet, everyone I met told me that I would come to love Nairobi, to the point that I would never want to leave. I smiled and nodded, but thought to myself that such a thing would never happen.

In the early days of fieldwork, I assumed that the city centre, referred to as the CBD (Central Business District) would be the main place to hang out or meet with friends. I soon found out that this was not the case in Nairobi. CBD is chaotic, stressful and always full of people. I was told that it is a place you go to by necessity, not for pleasure. Thus, I hardly spent any time in the CBD and neither did any of my informants. Nairobi consists of different suburbs, with the CBD located in the middle. Who resides in which suburb is in large part based on your economic status and, as mentioned above, it has been this way since independence when the elite Kenyans took over. The Kenyan Indians dominate one suburb called 'Parklands', and I was told that hardly any black Kenyans are allowed to rent or buy in that area. The middle and upper class black Kenyans might live in 'Lavington' or 'Kilimani', which are also popular neighbourhoods among expatriates. People working for the UN or the different embassies live in the richest part of town called Gigiri, which is an enclave located far away from the rest of the suburbs. Lower classes often live in Eastleigh, or maybe in the outskirts of the different suburbs. Moreover, and perhaps, most importantly, there is Westlands, which is located right outside of the CBD, that is, in the middle of the city. This is where most of the clubs and restaurants are, and where people from every part of town come to socialise with their friends. Westlands was the area where I spent a majority of my evenings with my informants.



Print screen retrieved from Google Maps

Going out to bars or clubs is common among young people in Nairobi, and among my informants, they often went out at least once a week, often two or three nights. The coolest place in Nairobi during my time there was a newly opened bar in Westlands, called ‘The Alchemist’, which was the main meeting place for young people who were part of what I call the creative scene. When you walk into The Alchemist, you get a feeling of being in New York or Berlin, rather than in Nairobi, and there is no other place like it in the city. The entire venue is outside, with different food trucks and fast food-joints, big comfortable couches, a stage and a big dancefloor, bars and even a tattoo shop. Almost every night a different event is held, which can be anything from a slam poetry session to a debate about mental illness. You can have lunch there during the day and then go out dancing at night. The Alchemist, as many other places in Nairobi, is very inspired by European and American culture, and the owner is originally from New York. This bar became one of the most important sites during my fieldwork and I will go into more detail on the importance of The Alchemist in the empirical chapters to follow.

Since Nairobi is such a big city and the different areas are far away from each other, Westlands is the ideal place to meet up, because of its location in the middle of town. Moreover, shopping malls are a big phenomenon in contemporary Nairobi, and they are

building a new one almost every year. This is once again a sign of Nairobi as a growing metropolitan city, and a result of globalization. A majority of the malls look very stylish on the inside, but are often located in areas with poor infrastructure outside of the compound. They are full of overly expensive clothing stores, and international fast food restaurants. You get the sense that these malls are designed for a class that does not seem to exist in Nairobi. The only people that can afford to buy their clothes in these stores are wealthy, foreign families. The prices are at times three times higher than what you would find in an average store in Norway. The malls are, in addition to Westlands, a common place to hang out with friends.

Nairobi is a city full of contradictions, which is typical for a country that is facing economic challenges. Just a few hundred metres from the wealthiest parts of town, with the nicest houses, you will find informal settlements. This, of course, makes sense in a way, because the upper class needs housemaids, gardeners and cooks, and the people living in the informal settlements want jobs that are close to their homes. Furthermore, what caught my attention during the first days in Nairobi was all the gates and walls around every house or apartment building, where one would usually also see one or two security guards standing outside. I lived in three different apartments, with the standard ranging from poor to very nice, but regardless of the type of place, they all had people guarding the house around the clock. My sentiments regarding the gates and guards were double-edged. On the one hand, it makes you feel safe, knowing that someone is looking out for potential robbers. On the other hand, it is also an indication of the actual threat; that the risk of someone trying to break into your house is so high that you need someone to be on the lookout night and day.

Before I arrived in Nairobi, almost everyone I talked to who had been there before, told me that you have to watch out for yourself and your belongings. The city's nickname is "Nairobbery", so with that in mind, you prepare yourself for the worst. I had heard that you should not wear jewellery of any kind, and keep your phone and wallet in your zippered handbag (preferably placed on your stomach to be sure) at all times. I followed precautions, at least for the first few weeks. After a while, I became more and more comfortable with walking the streets, with just as much jewellery as I pleased and without looking over my shoulder and clinging on to my purse. Moreover, as a couple of months passed, I even started to enjoy my life there; Nairobi was not as chaotic as I had first made it out to be, and even the occasional chaos has its charm. As one of my male friends said jokingly, "*To handle Nairobi,*

*you need to be a hustler, cause this city is crazy.*” When June ended, and it was time to leave, I had fallen in love with this “city under the sun”<sup>1</sup>. Apparently, everyone was right. I now wanted to stay there forever.

## Outline of chapters

All of the chapters, except for chapter one, are mainly ethnographic in style. I have, in large part, let my informants’ views and the empirical data guide this thesis, and then supplemented it with theory. However, it proved necessary to provide this thesis with a theoretical framework, which includes a discussion of feminist anthropology, theories on intersectionality, a focus on globalization, and theories on class, as expressed in consumption and a search for distinction. Thus, chapter one provides a theoretical framework and methodology. The second chapter, *“Being a Young Woman in Nairobi”*, is concerned with the lives of my informants, discussing factors they emphasized as empowering or degrading in their daily practices, and making clear how society and the government are contributing to, or limiting, women’s empowerment. A discussion detailing how class plays into their lives is also crucial. Moreover, this chapter gives a background that allows a better understanding of young women’s views and enactments of the concept of feminism. In chapter three, *“Problematizing Feminism”*, I discuss why the concept of feminism often does not fit the context of Nairobi, and reasons why some of my informants found feminism difficult to identify with. Furthermore, it is concerned with how the feminist identity is contextual and how my informants often had to conceal parts of this identity depending on the situation. The next chapter, *“Developing Feminism(s)”*, is highly interconnected with its predecessor. I have still chosen to keep them separate, because they arguably investigate two sides of the same coin. This chapter discusses the development of a feminism that accounts for young, Kenyan women’s specific contexts, and that emphasizes a focus on intersectionality and difference. It focuses on the importance of a ‘black’ or ‘African’ feminism that is distinguished from what my informants view as the ‘white, Western’ kind, but still a feminism that is inspired by global flows. Moreover, I am discussing the development of what I have labelled ‘performative feminism’, which is enacted among a group of young creatives in Nairobi, and how ideas of consumption and distinction are made relevant within this group. In the final

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<sup>1</sup> Nairobi’s informal slogan.

chapter, "*Sexualities and Masculinities*", I investigate how feminist identity affects young women's view of their sexuality and their relationships to the men in their lives. Furthermore it shows how a focus on men's views of their own identities and their ideas of masculinity are crucial to an understanding of how patriarchy works in practice and how women view themselves. I argue that young men within the creative scene in Nairobi are contributing to the development of feminism and to new ideas of masculinity. I will end this thesis with a summary of my main arguments, and concluding remarks.



# Chapter one: Theory and methodology

## Theoretical framework

While choosing a theoretical framework, I have tried my best to let the empirical findings guide the analytical direction of the ethnography, and not the other way around. I have sought to find theory that highlights and complements the material gathered, but also theory that contests it. There is, in addition to this, one obvious subfield of anthropology to engage with, which is feminist anthropology and feminist theories concerning intersectionality.

Furthermore, I have used anthropological discussions on globalization and class related consumption to show how these are crucial phenomena when it comes to understanding negotiations of feminism among young women in Nairobi.

## Feminist anthropology

To understand where feminist anthropology is today, it is necessary to give a brief outline of its history. There have, unquestionably been anthropologists before, after and in-between the few presented here, but one has to narrow down the focus. I have chosen to present arguments by Ortner (1974) and Rosaldo (1974, 1980), followed by Yanagisako and Collier (1987). I will then move on to theory that is especially relevant for this thesis, which is also naturally a continuation of feminist anthropology's history with a focus on intersectionality, beginning with Moore (1988), followed by Mohanty (2003), Crenshaw (1989) hooks (2000) and Butler (1990).

It started with the 'anthropology of women' in the 1970s, which aimed to confront the neglect of women in the discipline (Moore 1988: 1). Two of the women at the forefront of the 'anthropology of women', which eventually became known as feminist anthropology, were Sherry B. Ortner and Michelle Z. Rosaldo. Their contributions focused on the question of female subordination as a universal truth. In her paper, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1974), Ortner tried to expose why women everywhere are inferior to men, and also how it might be possible to change this way of thinking about, and relating to, women. Furthermore, she wanted to investigate the underlying logic behind such thinking (Ortner 1974: 68). To do so, she used the conceptual categories of "nature" and "culture", and equated culture with the notion or product of human consciousness, where humanity (culture) tries to

control nature. Culture was thereby understood as a symbol for man and nature for woman, and “*since it was always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it ‘natural’ to subordinate, not to say oppress, them*” (Ortner 1974: 73). What is important to underline is that Ortner was not arguing that the universality of women’s subordination means that there are no local variables, she was rather emphasising that, in order to study women’s position at a local level, one needs to have an initial explanation for this universal fact.

Ortner’s paper was published in Rosaldo and Lamphere’s book “Women, culture and society” (1974), where Rosaldo, gives a theoretical overview of how to study relations among and between the sexes. She, too, tied women to nature and domesticity, and men to culture and social life in the public sphere. Furthermore, Rosaldo argued that women are in many societies seen as anomalies and their individual pursuits and goals are often ignored. Thus, women are classified as simply women, whereas men are classified according to ranked, institutionalized positions (Rosaldo 1974: 31). ‘The anthropology of women’, thus began with the claim that women, in every society in the world, are of secondary status compared to men. This was, according to Rosaldo and Ortner, among others, a universal fact, which could work as a basic premise for studying and shedding light on women’s lives.

The arguments presented in their book were met with some opposition, and in response to some of the criticism, Rosaldo wrote a new article six years later, where she offered a renewed explanation, and discussed the limits of only studying women in society along the lines of the domestic/public dichotomy (1980). Rosaldo argued that feminist anthropologists need to study how gender figures in the organization of social groups, and that a woman’s place in social life is not directly a product of the things she does, but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions (1980: 400). Furthermore, the idea proposed in 1974 - of ranking societies in terms of ‘woman’s place’, and speaking of women’s status, gives the impression that ‘woman’ is universally opposed to ‘man’ in the same way in all contexts. In 1980, Rosaldo wrote that she now believed “*that gender is not a unitary fact determined everywhere by the same sorts of concerns but, instead, the complex product of a variety of social forces*” (1980: 401).

There was, in other words, a shift from only studying women, to studying gender relations in a wider social context, and her new altered statement was that sexual asymmetry is a political and social fact; that we should concern ourselves with relationships, not with individuals, and

explore what guides people in their actions and shapes their understandings (Rosaldo 1980: 414). In their book, “Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis” (1987), Yanagisako and Collier, building on Ortner and Rosaldo, took these ideas a step further. They suggested that in order to keep ourselves from reinventing potentially problematic analytic dichotomies, we need to base our research on the premise that “(...) *there are no ‘facts’, biological or material, that have social consequences and cultural meanings in and of themselves.*” (1987: 39). In short, their argument was that neither sex (biological), nor gender (social), is universal, and that these concepts have locally specific meanings.

Thus, feminist anthropology moved on from studying women based on the dichotomy of nature versus culture or domestic versus public. This is where Henrietta Moore, among others, came in. One of the main arguments in her book, “Feminism and Anthropology”, was that concepts like ‘woman’ (and ‘man’), are culturally constructed. Therefore, as anthropologists studying women, we need to focus on the particularity, and keep in mind that

*(...) the concept ‘woman’ cannot stand as an analytical category in anthropological enquiry, and consequently there can be no analytical meaning in such concepts as ‘the position of women’, ‘the subordination of women’ and ‘male dominance’ when applied universally* (Moore 1988: 7).

In other words, by developing away from ‘the anthropology of women’, towards a ‘feminist anthropology’, the discipline went through three phases: from the study of women as inherently subordinate to men, to the study of gender, and then on to the study of real differences between women; that is, a study that is also concerned with how racism divides gender identities and how class is shaped by gender and race (Moore 1988: 11). Moore criticized the ‘Anthropology of Women’ for being exclusionary, as it was established via a discourse about women that was constructed based on ‘Western’ cultural assumptions. Anthropologists like Ortner and Rosaldo wanted to challenge men’s rights to speak for women, but in the process, they found themselves speaking *for* other women (Moore 1988: 191).

## Intersectionality: Gender, Race and Class

Theories like the ones presented by Ortner and Rosaldo in 1974 may seem somewhat banal and exclusionary to contemporary feminists, but it is important to keep in mind the spirit of the time it was written in, and that such discussions helped the discourse develop into what it is today. Which brings me to the feminist theories that are particularly relevant to this thesis. I have been inspired by Moore's book mentioned above, and especially by the insight that there is no universally subordinate woman. My aim, therefore, is not to speak *for* women, but to tell their stories in a careful manner. Moore (1988) started by emphasizing the importance of intersectionality, but Mohanty has taken this a step further, and her theory presented in "Feminism without Borders" (2003) has been of great importance in the analysis of my empirical data. Feminist anthropology has been the study of women's lives, and of gender relations, but not necessarily the study of how these women understand and engage with feminism. Mohanty writes this concerning the subject,

*Unlike the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms, which has been explored in great detail over the last few decades, histories of Third World women's engagement with feminism are in short supply. There is a large body of work on 'women in developing countries', but this does not necessarily engage feminist questions (2003: 45-46).*

Engagements with feminism and negotiations around what it means to be a feminist in an urban, Kenyan context is what I aim to present and discuss in this thesis.

Mohanty also criticizes feminist theory and anthropology for placing all 'Third World' women under the same category of repressiveness, without taking factors such as racism and colonialism into account (2003: 46). She further expresses frustration with the way that Western feminist discourse on women in the 'Third World' has constructed an idea of 'women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group. (Mohanty 2003: 21). I share this sentiment; in fact, it has been one of the greatest motivations for writing this thesis: a wish to be part of a larger effort aimed at portraying African women in general, and Kenyan women in particular, in a more nuanced light. As will be clear in the following chapters, as much as many women's lives in Nairobi are constrained by the patriarchy and discrimination, the women I did research among are also strong, smart, independent and creative. I want to show their particular struggles, but also highlight their particular pleasures and agency.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) originally coined the concept of intersectionality, to address the fact that black women were excluded both from feminist and anti-racist movements. She argued, *“Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated”* (Crenshaw 1989: 140). Thus, the concept refers to the interaction of different forms of oppression simultaneously, such as gender, race, and class (Davis 2008: 68). As mentioned in the introduction, it is a concept that has gained momentum in feminist studies and among activists in recent years, and is of undeniable importance to the feminist movement. I have also relied on the work of bell hooks (2000), which addresses feminism among African-Americans, in order to shed light on why many black women struggle with the concept of feminism today, and feel there is no room for them in the movement. hooks, inspired by Crenshaw, argues that,

*White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state* (2000: 4).

A majority of the non-feminists (and the feminists, for that matter) presented in this thesis, felt that they could not relate to the movement, because none of their ‘real’ issues were being addressed, and it was all about ‘white, western women’. Others, who have focused on intersectionality and inclusion, are feminist scholars like Judith Butler, mentioned previously, who in her influential book *“Gender Trouble”* (1990), criticizes traditional feminists for contributing to an idea of a natural, essential female. Butler rather argues that gender is connected to performance, one that is fluid, not essential (1990). Even though Butler is mainly concerned with queer-theory and non-binary gender identities, her theories on gender as a performance is particularly interesting in relation to a discussion in chapter five.

Class is a contentious term, which has been difficult to grasp and define in anthropology, but James G. Carrier and Don Kalb’s book, *“Anthropologies of Class”* (2015), has contributed to an understanding as to how class can be a lens through which to study other social phenomena. Kalb defines class as something that commonly *“(…) refers to structural social divisions, and sees those divisions as influencing individual and collective behaviour, cultural and political afflictions and social pathologies of modern and modernizing societies”* (2015: 1). Kalb further states that class is a set of power balances, surrounded by an array of

unevenly assembled myths, ideologies and practises of individualism, progress and space making (2015: 14). Since my focus is on middle-class women in particular, it is necessary to give an outline of how I define who constitutes the middle class in a Nairobi context. In the field, I chose to define the middle class in terms of the parents of my informants' ability to pay for their children's higher education, but also in terms of consumption. I have therefore relied on theories concerning consumption and distinction, such as Bourdieu (1986) and Liechty (2003), which entails a focus on how individuals and groups 'perform' class culture to distinguish oneself from others. Moreover, I have found Bourdieu's (2011 [1986]) theory on the forms of capital useful to understand how feminism can function as a form of social capital within the creative scene in Nairobi.

## Feminism as an undefinable concept

As much as this thesis is about women, and gender relations, it is equally as much about the complexity of concepts and how they gain new meaning and expression at a local level. Concepts often give the impression of universality, such as the concept 'woman' discussed above. Feminism is no exception - it is the kind of word that everyone thinks they know the meaning of, yet if I were to try to give a single definition of this concept, I would end up reinforcing the idea of universality, i.e. that all women inherently are seeking the same (Moore 1988: 10). Furthermore, I would be contradicting this thesis' aim, which is to shed light on different local understandings of feminism, and in turn, empirically underline the importance of a focus on intersectionality. What I will do, inspired by Mohanty (2003), is to give an account of my personal view of feminism, which undoubtedly has affected the directions my research has taken, and has on occasion coloured my findings. As much as one might try, it is impossible to enter any given situation without preconceived assumptions. My feminism, which is influenced both by my upbringing in Scandinavia, but also by my mixed background as half Nigerian, is as follows: it is a feminism that is centred around fighting for all people's rights, regardless of race, class or gender, to have the same opportunities to achieve their goals and live their best lives, and one that recognizes that it is first and foremost the patriarchal society in which we live, and not individual tendencies, that is standing in the way of achieving this equity. Finally, my idea of feminism is inclusive, and accepts that different individuals have different ways of expressing and enacting their own personal feminisms.

In light of this, I have chosen to follow what Sylvia Walby's (2011) describes as a 'self-definition' of feminism, which entails that a person is feminist only if they say they are feminist (Walby 2011: 3). This, as will be clear in the following chapters, does not mean that the non-feminist informants' opinions and goals do not at times overlap with what I would call feminist, they most often do. But I would argue that women's agency and ability to make the choice of labelling themselves, is an important aspect that should not be set aside. This is especially important in societies like Nairobi where feminism is not particularly accepted, and where there might be stigma attached to the word. Walby writes that the approach of self-definition has its difficulties because "[t]he term 'feminist' is contentious – indeed even stigmatised. 'Feminism' is a signifier of something very particular and comes with additional meanings attached, which many seek to avoid" (2011: 3). Because it is a term with so many negative connotations, the part of feminism that is a movement or ideology, stands to lose potential 'followers', who do identify with the content, but have issues with the word.

## Globalization and feminism

The word feminism, and the feminist movement, has its origin in the 'Western world', even though women in other places around the world arguably have been engaging with the ideology of feminism, but not using the term (Mohanty, 2003: 50). As a result of globalization - because people travel and media flows freely, feminism has moved to spaces beyond the 'Western world'. Arjun Appadurai's theory of global cultural flows explains how the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony and selectivity, and as a result, agency (1996: 7). He states that this imagination, attained through global flows and the media, provides a ground for action, and not only for escape into a 'fantasy' or dream of how your life could be. Furthermore, globalization is not synonymous with homogenization, because this imagination creates subjectivity. I have also relied on Anna Tsing (2005) to understand these global movements, and how they are always filled with friction. Her idea of 'activist packages', is particularly interesting. The argument is that "(...) activism moves in 'charismatic packages', allegorical modules that speak to the possibilities of making a cause heard. These packages feature images, songs, morals, organizational plans, or stories" (Tsing 2005: 227). When these activist packages are brought to new locations, they always enter new fields of meaning and action to make a difference in that particular context (Tsing 2005: 227).

I argue, following Tsing, that feminism is such an activist package, and because the concept is not universal, it naturally gains different meanings depending on the place and the people that adopt the package, even though the label remains the same. However, Tsing states that these packages can only travel if they are translated in such a way that they form a significant intervention in a local scene, and if they are used in local debates (2005: 236). As the empirical data presented in this thesis will show, many women did not want to label themselves until they realized that feminism could fit the African or Kenyan context, and the way they came to this realization was often through seeing African female role models openly speak out about feminism, either in real life or online. A majority of my informants gained feminist inspiration and motivation, and shared their personal feminism, through social media. Social media also played a big part in my research as a method during fieldwork, as will be discussed below. Moreover, I have found Artisteia Fotopoulou (2016) useful in the discussion on how feminist identities are being reconfigured with digital media and how we might be moving into an era of “*digital sisterhood*” (2016: 37, 61).

## Methodology

### Determining the field

Before arriving in Nairobi, I was prepared to meet some challenges in terms of defining my field site. When doing research in a big city, one continually has to set boundaries for where the field begins and where it ends, and in many ways, the fieldwork becomes multi-sited (Marcus 1995). There was no fixed geographical location to discover where all potential informants resided, instead they were scattered all over the city, and I actively had to move from space to space to find them. Even though a fixed field site was not available to me, I found something close to such a thing at the bar The Alchemist, mentioned in the introduction. It became a site where I met a majority of my informants for the first time and where I gained access to the creative scene of Nairobi, as this was their main meeting space. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I started going out there on weekends, without the intention of finding potential informants, but after a while, I came to appreciate the importance of this place for my research too. I would often go there with friends or informants, and they would introduce me to their networks and women that could be potential informants. After that

initial introduction and getting their contact information, I normally followed up by asking if they wanted to have a coffee, lunch or drink with me. Concerning language, it is worth mentioning that all of my informants spoke English fluently, as this and Swahili are the two formal languages in Kenya. Thus, there were no language barriers during fieldwork.

I mostly made male friends in the beginning. Maybe this was just a coincidence, but my experience was that they were easier to get in contact with, and more open to talk to strangers. I did have suspicions that their reasons for approaching me were not purely because they thought I looked like an interesting human being. Nevertheless, I made several good male friends who helped my research in a number of ways. It also gave me an opportunity to get insights into men's view of feminism and masculinity, which is a small, yet important part of this thesis.

Instagram was also a crucial tool in terms of finding informants. I, as most people my age, frequently use the application, but the thought of using it as a methodological tool during fieldwork had not crossed my mind. What is interesting is that many people in Nairobi in general and among the creatives in particular, use Instagram to build a professional network of likeminded creatives. Thus, since Instagram was important to my informants, it became important to me. I would start following women who I thought might be feminists or passionate about women empowerment and then contact them to ask if they would be interested in meeting me. It also often happened the other way around; that is, they would start following or contacting me on the application. Instagram was also indirectly beneficial in terms of degree of access. The fact that I already had three informants within the creative scene, who posted pictures of me on their Instagram that had thousands of followers, made my face known to other potential informants. Which in turn meant that if I went to an event at The Alchemist, for instance, they had already seen me, and were more inclined to talk to me. Instagram was truly important in terms of finding informants and getting access in the creative scene, and as Markham (2013) argues, there is value in opening up to other possibilities of doing ethnography, such as using social media as a research tool.

## Data collection

During my six months in Nairobi, I found that I never stuck to one method of data collection, but was switching between just having conversations, doing participant observation, and conducting informal, and a few formal, interviews. This depended on the person I was with, the time they had available and how well we connected. While gathering the data I switched between writing in a notebook, recording conversations, and just writing jot notes down on my phone. The situation I found myself in, decided the form of data collection. It was, for instance, not always natural for me to pull out my notebook at a party or a bar, and I would then use my phone instead.

I conducted a few, formalized, interviews with men and women working in the field of empowering women, or with professors in related fields. The interviews never turned out to be as formal as expected, and after a few questions, I most often just let the conversation go where my informants wanted to take it. This type of data collection, however, happened rarely, and only when I met with people I knew would only have time for that one meeting. Still, I did conduct a couple of particularly interesting interviews which inspired me, or helped me focus my research. Another way of gathering data was through a mixture between informal interviews and loose conversations. When introduced to new women who might become informants, I told them about the research and then asked if we could meet again. However, they often did not understand how I wanted to conduct my research. This meant that when we had our first sit-down, at a café or a restaurant, they had often prepared for an interview. I therefore always had a few questions on hand to get the conversation started. From thereon it mostly flowed freely and I let them guide the discussion.

Participant observation was my main way of collecting data, as is the case with most anthropological research. A majority of the initial informal interviews ended with a shared desire to meet again. Since most of my informants were women around my age, it made it easier for us to connect on a friendship level, and it did not seem strange that I would hang out with them in social settings. I became very close with most of them; they invited me to birthday parties, social gatherings or debates and seemed genuinely interested in spending time with me. When I met with them after this first scheduled 'meeting', the conversations were always very informal and they at times seemed to forget that I was doing research, which was something I reminded them of frequently. Most of my participant observation,

apart from meetings for lunch or a coffee, I conducted at social events or parties, most of which took place at The Alchemist.

I had expected to spend more time in the homes of my informants, but this rarely happened. Most young people in Nairobi live at home with their parents while going to university, unless they are not originally from the city, and moved there to study. In other words, it seemed that they preferred not to have friends visiting their homes; they would rather meet somewhere else, where they could do what they pleased without the judgement of their parents. The few informants, on the other hand, that had their own place or shared a flat, often invited friends over for drinks or other activities. My shared apartment also became a place where we could gather.

## Key informants

Almost all of the feminist informants I will discuss here were part of what I have called the creative scene in Nairobi, but there were, of course, some exceptions to the rule; a few informants within this group were not feminists and a few informants outside of it were. In what is to follow, I will briefly describe the women, and a couple of men, that I consider my key informants. Later on in this thesis, I will come to mention other informants, but they will then be briefly introduced. As mentioned, my most important gatekeepers and acquaintances were men, because they in turn introduced me to their female networks. I would not have gotten to know as many women as I did, if not for them. I will therefore introduce two of them first.

Marcus is a twenty-six-year-old man who studied computer science in university, but chose to follow his dream, and become a filmmaker together with his friend Andy instead. I met Marcus and Andy during my first week in Nairobi, and we instantly connected. The three of us moved in together in February. From the moment I met Marcus, and told him about my research, he was beyond helpful and searched through his entire network to find potential contacts for me. Because of him, I met with so many interesting people, and a few of them turned into informants.

Another friend and gatekeeper is Isaac, a funny and energetic man. He is also twenty-six, and studied business in university, but much like Marcus, he chose to follow his own dream

instead of his parents, so he now works as a stylist. We did not meet until a couple of months into my fieldwork, but then became great friends and saw each other on a regular basis throughout my stay. I soon realised that he was somewhat of a key personality in the creative network. When he walked into a room, everyone turned their heads, and wherever we went, he knew people. I think that getting to know him, was what got me such deep access into the creative scene, because all of a sudden, people noticed me too. Isaac is either full of energy and laughs or is completely quiet - there is no in-between.

Jamila is a twenty six-year-old law student at a university in Nairobi, one of my first informants, and one of the first feminists I met. Marcus introduced her to me - the two of them grew up together. Jamila is a young woman full of energy and knowledge. When she finishes law school, she wants to work with implementing laws that empower women in Kenya. Jamila, as many others in the creative scene, is studying, but also doing her creative activities on the side. She is passionate about fashion design and modelling. An outstandingly tough woman, she is never afraid to stand up for herself or on behalf of others.

Ashita is twenty-one year old woman, also studying law. Her roots are Punjab, but her family has lived in Kenya for many generations. As opposed to the majority of Indians and Pakistanis in Nairobi, she almost exclusively has black Kenyan friends. I was introduced to her through her girlfriend at the time, who was my informant Kate. When she is not studying, Ashita writes poetry and throws events at The Alchemist every month. Most of her poetry is about controversial topics such as gay love, mental illness and feminism. She is a quiet and introverted young woman, but feels that through her poetry she can truly express herself.

Kate is nineteen years old, and was taking a gap year before university when I met her. Our first encounter was an unconventional one. She contacted me on the social media application, Instagram, in February, and wanted us to meet up. As a researcher fresh into the field, I was very grateful that someone reached out to me, and not the other way around. Kate is a free spirit in life and love, and one would always see her with a new lover by her side. During my fieldwork she was more of a “gateway” than a direct informant. She introduced me to her network of friends both within, and outside of, the creative scene.

Louise is nineteen years old, and was in her first year in college in the United States, so we did not meet until the beginning of June, when she came home for her summer holidays. Louise is sweet, with a calm voice, but she still has a way of speaking with conviction. When

she graduates, she wants to live in Nairobi and work in a gender related field to empower marginalized women. Louise and I also met through Instagram. She started following me and I saw that she had a feminist blog, so I decided to contact her.

Helena is one of the few feminist informants who are not part of the creative network, even though she is an artist, and therefore, a creative. She is a twenty-four-year-old journalist, painter and jewellery maker, and used to work as a journalist for an online magazine, but was now pursuing artistry full time. Helena might be the one of my informants who was most passionate about feminism and who always –without exception – wanted to talk about feminist issues.

Zola is a twenty-year-old woman, who had just finished her third year of African studies at Yale University (USA), but was taking a semester off to be home in Nairobi when I met her, through my friend Isaac. She is the kind of woman who makes everyone around her feel included, and always listens deeply when someone speaks. Zola is also part of the creative scene in Nairobi, but not as present as many of the others are. She has many good friends within it, but she still does not have any problems criticizing the network when criticism is due. Zola's identification with feminism was fluid, and she continually wanted to develop her identity.

Amina is also part of the creative network and well known through Instagram, with over fifty thousand followers. She is twenty-two years old, and finished a degree in graphic design, but started an online second-hand shop and works with that full time. Before I finally got a first sit-down with Amina, I had only said a brief hello to her at different gatherings and events, so I did not know much about her, except from how she portrayed herself on social media. Then, when we had our first proper conversation, I was surprised to notice that she is a very shy and introverted woman, who is not comfortable with being the centre of attention.

Eve is a twenty-four-year-old mechanical engineering student, and was finishing her degree the spring of 2017. Marcus introduced us, and he later told me that they used to date. At first glance, Eve looks shy. She is a tiny, young woman, with big glasses, but when she opens her mouth, that first impression of shyness disappears. Eve says that four years of studying in a 'masculine' environment has made her toughen up a bit.

Joy is twenty-one, and studies criminal justice at a high-end international university a little outside of town. I met her through a common acquaintance who also attends the same

university, so I ended up spending quite a lot of time at the campus. Joy is not particularly nice, and only talks to you on her own terms. It therefore took some time to get to know her. Her whole being radiates confidence, and she never lets anyone tell her what to do.

## Self-reflexivity and positioning

When doing participant observation, the researcher becomes a big part of the method, and our age, gender and personality in many ways decides what type of data and access one is able to get (Cohen 1984: 221-222). Furthermore, who the researcher is as a person and what she is drawn to, has an effect on the direction of the research. As briefly mentioned above, I experienced that my age and gender definitely was relevant in terms of the degree of access to my informants. I rarely looked like I was “out of place” when I was tagging along with them on different social gatherings, because I could just as well have been their friend and not a researcher gathering data. Another factor is the colour of my skin, a light brown tone, which made me blend in slightly better, but not at all as well as I had thought before fieldwork. In most cases, I was viewed as “Mzungu”<sup>2</sup>. After a while, I transcended into “Black mzungu”, meaning I did not ‘act as white’ as I apparently did in the beginning. Those referring to me as “mzungu” were mostly men and kids on the street. My friends and informants did not seem to care much about my skin colour and those within the creative network emphasized other factors far more; namely “coolness” and the ability to stand out.

I had not considered that my looks, and not the ones I am born with, would be a factor during my fieldwork, but it was. I frequently noticed that the way I dressed and my ‘buzz cut’ hairstyle gained interest and attention among the creatives, because how you express yourself through style is a big part of their lives and their careers. This is purely speculation, but I do not think I would have gained such deep access within this group if I had been the kind of person that blends in with the crowd, regardless of my skin colour. What is interesting, is that this is the exact opposite of what a student about to embark on her first field-work is often told; to blend in with the environment, to not make too much of herself and to try and avoid causing a disruption. In my case, I often ended up doing quite the opposite. Personality is, of course, also highly relevant here, and is related to the attributes mentioned above. One has to

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<sup>2</sup> A word used in many African countries to describe a “white person”.

connect with their informants to get them to share their lives and stories with you. I felt that I deeply connected with a majority of my informants, beyond just being a researcher, but also building friendships with them.

## Ethical considerations

When doing ethnographic research, using ourselves as tools, everything can potentially have ethical implications. I experienced some anxiety concerning the fact that I had become such good friends with my informants. Since we connected so well, and I often spent time with them in settings where it might have been easy for them to forget that I was primarily a researcher, I sometimes found myself in conversations during which sensitive things were shared. Once these situations occurred and if the sensitive topics were relevant to the research, I always asked them for permission to write it down afterwards. During every first meeting with a new informant, I told them about the type of research I was conducting, what it entailed and asked if they wanted to be made anonymous. They all said that they did not care if I used their real names or not. Regardless, I have still chosen to anonymise them, because given the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, informants can never be completely aware of the context in which the material will be presented in the final text. Thus, none of the names presented in this thesis are my informants' real names.

## Summary

In the first part of this chapter, I presented the thesis' main theoretical frameworks, which includes feminist anthropology, theories on intersectionality, class related consumption, and views of globalization. I started with an outline of the history of feminist anthropology because these initial discussions were what helped the discourse develop into what it is today. I then presented the theories that are especially relevant in this thesis, namely feminist theories that focus on intersectionality, and that emphasize the importance of investigating locally specific understandings of feminist identity. Furthermore, I presented views of class and consumption, and how I defined who constituted as the middle class in Nairobi. Lastly, I

argued that a focus on globalization and the flow of ‘activist packages’ is important to understand the spread of feminism to new locations.

In the second part, I discussed the different methods I used during fieldwork, and ethical considerations. I have described how I constructed the field and discovered my informants. I then outlined my main ways of data collection, which were a few formal interviews, loose conversations and participant observation. Furthermore, I have shortly introduced my key informants, to give the reader a better understanding of who they are, followed by a discussion concerning self-reflexivity and my position in the field. Finally, I discussed the ethical implications of becoming as close with my informants as I did, and the question of whether or not I should anonymize them.

# Chapter two: Being a young woman in Nairobi

*“It’s great being a woman in Kenya; if you have money and an education! If you don’t, it’s no good at all.” (Ann)*

This chapter is concerned with the experience of being a young woman in Nairobi today, with emphasis on the daily lives of women moving around in different spheres, on sexual harassment and catcalling, and on the individual and societal pressure to get married. Furthermore, it discusses how different structural factors such as access to education and women’s role in politics affect the lives of women. While the challenges these young women face are important to highlight, their joys, dreams and aspirations in life are of equal importance. As mentioned in the introduction and theoretical framework, I wish to give an account of my informants’ lives that differs from much of what has dominated the discourse on what Mohanty (2003) calls ‘Third World Women’; one that often portray them as powerless, and homogeneous. The fact that my informants are part of the middle-class unquestionably affects their lives and opportunities, and a focus on class and consumption is therefore relevant throughout this chapter. The overall purpose of this chapter is also to give an outline and background, interwoven with analysis, of the lives of young women in Nairobi, before embarking on a discussion of their views on feminism in the forthcoming chapters, because the one naturally affects the other.

## Street harassment

One of the first words I learnt in Swahili was *“fisi”*. Its direct translation to English is the animal “hyena”, but in Nairobi, the term also had a social translation. Marcus taught me this one day in the middle of January, while we were walking down the street, on our way to enjoy a cup of coffee together. He had noticed how men by the side of the road were staring at me, saying inappropriate things both in English and in Swahili. The term is used to describe men who *“prey on women like the animal preys on its potential kill, and they are not picky, they will eat anything”* (Marcus), meaning that the men who are called *fisi* are ‘desperate’ and will try to make a move on every woman they see. A *fisi* can be anyone who hits on a high number of women, but among my friends and informants, they mainly used the word to refer to the street harassers. Furthermore, the men who were commonly referred to as *fisi* and most likely

to catcall or harass women were often, in a generalizing sense, men without higher education and/or without a steady job. They could be conductors and male passengers on the bus, men loitering by the side of the road, mechanics, etc.

Street harassment, or catcalling, is a big problem in Nairobi. This is not a locally specific phenomenon, it arguably happens in most big cities around the world, but regardless of street harassment being a potentially global phenomenon, it was still an issue often raised among my informants. Whenever we met, they always had a new story to share about men yelling nasty things at them, or grabbing them by the arm on their way to meet me. Talking about street harassment was also a way of connecting with my informants, because I could share stories of my daily encounters with harassment that were of a very similar character, and in turn deeply resonated with their experiences. Women's reactions to sexual harassment are not just about annoyance or anger, but also about fear. Amina made the following statement, expressing what it was like to have to face catcallers and sexual harassment on a daily basis,

*Your whole life, your whole life is a struggle. Even just leaving your house before you get to the bus stage, catcallers grabbing your arm, and then you get to the stage, conductors grabbing your arm, even your ass. There is this notion with guys, if you don't want to talk to them, they get violent. (...) [Then] you meet a nice guy, and you have no idea how to talk to them now, because you're scared they're going to turn crazy. What guys are afraid of in jail, I'm afraid of everyday; you can get raped anywhere.*

Amina's statement shows both annoyance, anger and fear at the same time, and although not all of my informants expressed it to this degree, my impression was still that they were all afraid of being assaulted by strange men, and this fear was a constant one. Moreover, what Amina said about not knowing how to act around men anymore, because you are always suspicious, is an important aspect of the problem. It shows that this anger and fear towards street harassers in particular, is expanding to being afraid of men in general, and that every man is viewed as a potential assaulter.

If one is new to Nairobi one learns quickly what to, and what not to wear, to gain as little unwanted male attention in the street as possible. Your skirt should ideally be knee length, and not too tight, and shorts are out of the question. Following this dress code does not mean that a woman will not get catcalled or grabbed at all, but it might minimize the risk. I

mentioned above that sharing stories of street harassment was a way of connecting with my informants; through reflecting on a common struggle. Ashita and I were walking from lunch one day, instead of taking the bus. It was a far stretch from the restaurant to where we were going to meet up with some friends, but it was nice to walk for once and also to get to know Ashita properly. She is, as I mentioned in the methodology section, an introverted person, and I think it took some time before she felt comfortable around me. Regardless, we were walking in the hot Nairobi sun, sweating, minding our own business, when a car slowed down on the road beside us. It was a middle-aged man and he drove at the pace we were walking, staring at us through the open window. We looked back at him, without saying anything, and he then looked directly at me, saying, “*Hey sista, you are very pretty!*” I did not respond and we just kept walking, looking straight ahead trying not to encourage him. He then got offended and yelled, “*It’s polite to say thank you!*” Both Ashita and I had lost our patience at this point and yelled back at him, “*Why would I thank you for catcalling me?*” He then got embarrassed, and drove off.

Ashita and I then talked about catcalling for the remainder of the walk to our friend’s house, and she was noticeably frustrated. This particular incident might not seem very serious, and the man’s comment could have been much worse, but for Ashita, and most of my other informants, this harassment happens every day, so there comes a point where they become tired and angry. Street harassment as a form of sexism might seem rather harmless, in the sense that it does not have an effect on, for example, your access to an education or a career. Regardless, it still has an effect on these women’s views of themselves and of men. Being catcalled and harassed several times a day most likely makes you feel like an object – reduced to a purely sexual being, and according to Amina and Ashita, it also makes you angry with, and afraid of, men in general.

One of my informants, Alyssa, is a thirty-year-old woman who works in the transportation sector in Nairobi. Part of her job is educating bus drivers and conductors on how to treat women who ride their buses. She told me that she often feels like she is starting at level zero, and that many of the men she trains are wondering why women are now working instead of just being homemakers, like their mothers’ generation. They are expressing frustration and saying things like, “*women nowadays are growing horns*”. Alyssa’s experience with training the conductors and drivers gives a glimpse of these men’s, and potentially the sexual harasser’s, point of view. One could argue that they might feel resentment towards some

contemporary women, because their masculine role, as providers, is no longer as secure as it used to be. They are not familiar with the new “autonomous woman” that is not dependent on a man. Moreover, this might be a more prevalent issue for men of lower class status, than other men who are higher up the class hierarchy. I will go further into this discussion in relation to the intersection between feminism and masculinity in chapter five.

There have been incidences of sexual harassment in Nairobi where the bus conductors and drivers are not just catcalling the women or touching them inappropriately. Sometimes it goes much further than that. Amina told me about an incident that happened a few years ago, where a woman was gang raped in an empty bus because the men thought her dress was too short, and therefore she deserved it. There was also another incident in 2014, when a young woman walking down the streets of the central business district got all her clothes torn off by a group of men, because she was, in their opinion, not dressed modestly enough. Alyssa worked on a campaign and demonstration in the aftermath, called “My Dress, My Choice”, and this was still being brought up on several occasions among my informants, as an example of a worst-case scenario. Furthermore, it was described as one of the first feminist demonstrations in Nairobi, with many thousands of participants in attendance.

Every time I took the bus, I thought of what happened to that girl. One evening I decided to take the bus home, even though I had been told several times that it was not safe for a woman to do so alone at night. I entered the bus, and sat down, waiting for it to fill up before leaving the stop. All of a sudden, I realised that I was the only woman there, surrounded by men, alone on a bus after dark. Of course, the chances of something happening to me on that bus were slim, but at that moment, I could not think rationally and was genuinely terrified the whole way home. This episode gave me a small taste of that fear many women have on a daily basis, a fear of being assaulted by strange men.

Fear seemed to be a recurring feeling expressed in conversations I had with my informants about street harassment. Not necessarily being constantly afraid, but rather, that the possibility of something bad happening, beyond purely verbal harassment, was on their minds.

Furthermore, it affected women’s movements, their behaviour and way of dressing, in certain spaces in the city. Jamila told me that if she was going to the CBD or travelling by bus, she most often wore pants, but if she was staying in the suburbs or going places by car, she could wear shorter skirts, and maybe show a little more skin. I was told that the men hanging out in the streets of the CBD were often worse in terms of shaming and catcalling than men in the

suburbs. There is often a noticeable class distinction between women and the harassers. As mentioned above, many of the men who catcall often do not have formal higher education, and are of a lower class background than my informants, which might affect their view of women. I will discuss class in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

## Education

One of my initial research questions, and a big part of the research proposal, was how education has an effect on a young woman's autonomy; that is, her ability to, socially and financially, be independent. Although this is of great importance in terms of empowerment, it soon became clear that among the women with whom I did research, education was already a taken for granted phenomenon. All my informants either were in the process of attaining, or had already finished, higher education. Regardless of the fact that education seemed to be a given among my informants, it still seemed to be a relevant factor to them. When I asked them what it was like to be a young woman in Nairobi, a majority of my informants listed education as the determining factor to lead a good life, as Ann's quote in the beginning of this chapter also suggests. Furthermore, education is one of the main ways to determine someone's class position. In Henrike Donner's article on middleclass families in Calcutta, India (2015), she argues that who is defined as such in large part has to do with the ability to attain a higher education. She writes that "*education not only conveys a set of skills, but literally makes a middle-class person, shaping a youngster by instilling virtues such as discipline and self-control that the working class supposedly does not have*" (Donner 2015, 141).

Those of my informants who were not yet finished with their degree, like Jamila, Ashita, Louise or Zola, for instance, all seemed very passionate about their choice of education. Jamila and Ashita, in particular, both wanted to use their law degrees to empower women, and Louise wanted to major in gender studies for her bachelor degree in the states. Nevertheless, they seemed to be the minority when it came to studying what one is truly interested in. A majority of the people that I came to know in Nairobi did not work in fields related to their degrees. This was especially the case within the creative scene. All of my informants said that they had experienced pressure from their families to study certain courses. These were mainly subjects such as law, psychology, medicine, engineering, finance or banking – degrees that

would secure a job. They are often not free to make the choice themselves, because education is expensive and their parents are the ones paying tuition.

I conducted an interview towards the end of February, with Elisabeth, the national leader of an organization working with education and women empowerment. We talked about gendered aspects concerning higher education. She said that girls have less autonomy to choose their education than boys have, and that the parents often decide the degrees. Furthermore, Elisabeth argued that the female students do not have proper role models, because the lecturers are male, and that some courses are still considered to be for boys only. An example of women in male dominated studies is my informant Eve, who is studying mechanical engineering. She told me that they had a joke among the few female students that they were not really women anymore, because they had to put aside certain 'feminine aspects' of their identity to fit into the group. Furthermore, she told me that she did not want to work in engineering when she graduated in two months. She had big plans for her future, and wanted to move abroad, but she was worried about what her parents would say. The case of Eve both shows how the parents have control over their daughter's education, and also how being the female minority among men has forced her to set aside parts of her femininity to make it in her field.

I would argue that for many of my informants, education was important because it gives autonomy, the ability to make your own decisions and not be dependent on a man or on your family. Often, however, it also seemed to be just a means to an end, and not necessarily a passion. It was something you just had to get through, and then you could do whatever you wanted because no one was paying for your fees or giving you shelter anymore. I often heard my informants say that 'I went to university, I graduated, so now my parents are happy', even if they did not work with something related to their degree. I conducted an interview with Professor Andrews, who teaches at the international university where my informant, Joy, attends. She has conducted research on gender related topics, and is currently teaching gender courses at the university. When I asked her how education empowers women, she replied,

*It can be absolutely, positively transforming, but for this to happen you need to be properly educated, not only 'certified'. The middle - and upper class might need this the most, because they're so entitled. They are just here to get the piece of paper, because their future is secured anyways, and they are just doing this for their parents.*

*They already might have a job lined up, so they are not eager to learn, they think they don't need it.*

In her answer, Professor Andrews is not referring to women in particular, but 'privileged' students in general, regardless of gender. Her class perspective is interesting, and her statement confirms my argument about how education is often seen as a duty more than a free choice.

### Sexism within the education system

Even if education for women has become the norm, as Elisabeth pointed out - the majority of the professors and staff at universities in Nairobi are still men. This means that if something discriminating or inappropriate happens, it might be difficult for young women to speak up and they often have no one to turn to for help. One morning towards the end of May, I got a text message from Jamila, who was very frustrated because her law professor had been sending her inappropriate, sexist texts for quite some time. This same professor was responsible for giving the final grade of the semester and was currently assessing a paper she had written. He was sending, among other things, messages like, *"That face is so cute, it almost makes me horny"*. When she tried to explain, in a rather nice way, that she did not appreciate him saying such things, he brushed it off, saying she was overreacting. She wanted to tell him off, or report it to someone, but did not do it, in fear of him giving her a bad grade as a result.

When I met her a week later, the topic came up again, and she told me that a friend of hers had a similar experience, when her professor had asked her out on a date, and then threatened to grade her poorly if she did not say yes. Jamila's friend tried to go to the director of the faculty, but since the professor and director were both part of the same tribe, and friends, the director did not do anything about it. She eventually had to go to the person responsible for manually putting the grades into the school system, who was a woman, and tell her about the whole incident, and she agreed to counterfeit the grade, changing it to a better one. Jamila told me that this was only one of many incidences that friends, and herself, had experienced at university. At the end of our conversation, she said: *"It's hard being liberal in Africa, cause people then think you're a hoe"*. That is, because she expresses her sexuality, or, for instance, wears a revealing top, men think it is okay to give her unwanted attention. In some ways, it is comparable to men on the streets catcalling or violently undressing women because of the

way they are dressed, which they believe somehow justifies awful actions. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction here, because the male professors have power over the female students, whereas the streets harassers are most often of a lower class than many of the women they harass. This means that women can choose to confront the street harassers, without it necessarily having a larger consequence than the confrontation in itself.

### Education versus marriage

Education is an important factor in women's empowerment in Kenya (and anywhere else, for that matter). At a point during that education, however, many of my informants expressed that they had to make a choice; either pursue the educational path, or find a husband - because apparently, a Kenyan woman cannot have both. I heard from several of my informants that they were often told that Kenyan men do not like women with high degrees, and if she had a higher degree than a man did, they would most likely not want to marry her. Many women also expressed how their parents had told them to delay their masters until after they were married, because "you know how Kenyan men are". Another example is Alyssa, who explained how her previous fiancée had asked if she could hold off her master degree, so the dowry he had to pay to her family in the village would not be as expensive. In other words, women are being encouraged to get university degrees, but still implicitly (or explicitly) told by society that the most important factor in attaining a successful life is to find a man and marry him.

### Pressure to get married

*In contemporary Africa, we find that to some extent a woman who portrays masculine ways [sic] is looked at as moving up the scales and is tolerated, almost encouraged as long as she can combine the role by settling down eventually and having a husband to answer to (Odhiambo, Ocholla 2012: 71).*

The quote above is from an article written by two Kenyans, Odhiambo and Ocholla, which discusses body image and sexual stereotypes in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa (2012). Their argument coincides with some of the experiences my informants shared with me regarding marriage. It is traditionally common for women in Kenya to get married in the beginning of

their twenties, but since women's education has become more and more common, they now have the choice to get married later, marry for love instead of necessity, or not get married at all. Even if the choice is available, that does not necessarily mean that the external pressure is not there, like the choice between education and marriage, mentioned above. Regardless of pressure, my informants did not seem to let societal expectations stop them, and most of them expressed that it was more important for them to have a fulfilling career and finish just as many degrees as they wanted to, rather than getting married. Still, there was no doubt that marital pressure from family and society in general played a big part in a young woman's life. As Helena put it:

*I'm 24, and by society's standards, I should be married within a couple of years, but I don't know if I want to get married, I definitely don't want children. I sort of feel the pressure to get married, but I don't care. I would rather be alone than date a misogynist. Like, if he can't handle a feminist, I don't want him.*

Helena's quote does not represent all of my informants views, but it still shows the pressure to get married, and even more stigma in her case, since she does not want children, which is not a commonly accepted thing for a Kenyan woman to say. Most of the women felt that their families were pressuring them to get married, and some of them really wanted to, but at the right time and with the right man. They did not want to get married only for the sake of marriage. Some of them also spoke of 'traditional' values regarding the institution. Eve, for example, expressed that marriage was important for a successful life. She added that she wanted to leave something behind when she dies, meaning children. The next chapter will discuss how an emphasis on certain 'traditional' values might have an effect on your view of feminism.

Alyssa expressed that she felt the pressure, but to varying degrees. She just turned thirty, but said that most of her friends are either single or got married in their thirties. Thus, among her friends, the pressure was non-existent and it is becoming more and more acceptable for women to marry later. The lack of pressure might be because all her friends were also educated and focused on their careers. Regardless, Alyssa still felt some sort of pressure from her family and from men,

*My mom is trying to make me as comfortable as possible with being single, but then she's like, 'oh are you going on a date, please be nice, be a good girl'. In regards to*

*men, it's very interesting; so I've had three offers for a baby. Like I'll meet a guy, we're friends, and then they'll be like, 'so you want us to have a baby?' That is a result of sexism, they think that at this age, I'm definitely dying for babies, my biological clock is ticking.*

I would argue that many of my informants, and that generation of women in general, are reworking these expectations concerning marriage, and changing the narrative in a way. Neither Helena nor Alyssa seemed to be bothered by external pressure, they were confident in themselves and what they wanted to achieve in life before potentially finding a man to settle down with. In Rachel Spronk's (2012) ethnography on sexuality among young professionals in Nairobi, she discusses how women view marital pressure. She confirms the empirical data and my argument about how the external pressure is definitely present in contemporary Nairobi, and how marriage is "*Celebrated by society as the symbol of patriarchal order*" (Spronk 2012: 171). Moreover, Spronk also discusses how her informants were anxious about marriage, fearing that they would then have to give up their autonomous identities, and be a 'housewife' instead (2012: 170-172). Certain aspects of Spronk's findings coincide with mine, but I would argue that the anxiety towards marriage was not as present among my informants. Helena, for instance, is an example of someone who would never settle down with a man who forced her to stay at home and cook, and as she put it; if he cannot handle a feminist, she does not want him.

My other informants did not talk much about the pressure to get married, and this might be because many of them were in the beginning of their twenties, or nineteen years old. Regardless of a feeling of pressure or desire for marriage, they all talked very much about dating and were active in that department, but these were often fleeting relationships, as is common for people in their twenties. Their expressions of sexuality and their dating preferences are particularly interesting, and will be discussed in detail in chapter five on sexuality and masculinity.

## Politics and affirmative action

Many of informants told me that they were normally not fond of talking politics, out of fear of causing conflict amongst their group of friends. I was told that this was because most

Kenyans vote according to tribe, and not necessarily for the party, or the presidential candidate, they agree with the most. Furthermore, a group of friends may consist of people from different tribes (mainly Kikuyu and Luo - the biggest ones), as is most often the case in a city like Nairobi, which in turn means that politics is a sensitive topic that is normally best avoided. However, I had apparently arrived at just the right time, because of the Kenyan election that was taking place in August 2017, and so the campaigns had just begun that spring. This meant that the topic was becoming unavoidable, because one could see pictures of the different candidates on every street corner, articles in every newspaper, and debates on every television channel.

One subject that always came up when we talked about women empowerment in regards to politics, was the affirmative action implemented in the new constitution in 2010. It states: *“Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.”* Further, that *“(…) the State shall take legislative and other measures to implement the principle that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender”* (Constitution of Kenya: 2010). The discussions I got involved in were mainly centred around the latter part of the law, which states that women have to make up one third of the elected officials, which is now the case in Kenya’s parliament. Even though more women were in parliament in theory, which is very important symbolically, this did not necessarily mean that they had any real power in practice. In the first elections after the new constitution in 2013, no female officials were elected into office, which meant that because of the affirmative action, a number of women had to be nominated regardless of votes. In the 2017 elections, just after I returned from fieldwork, the number of elected women had increased, but they are still far from the one-third requirement (The East-African: 12.08.2018).

On international women’s day, the 8th of March, I attended an event that included a series of panel discussions. One of them was dedicated to women in governance, and one of the women on the panel argued that the female officials in power were a disappointment, because once they were elected into office, they stopped speaking up on issues regarding women empowerment. She further explained that female parliamentarians seemed afraid of not being ‘liked’ or worried about being pushed out, so they would rather stay quiet and not cause any conflict. Consequently, even though women make up one-third, their male counterparts still have the deciding vote. Another one of the women in the panel, who was an elected politician,

asked a question to the audience, *“How many of you voted for a female official in the last election?”* While the majority of us in the audience were women, only a few people in total raised their hands, and a majority of those that did were men. I remember being astonished by the fact that so few women raised their hands. It was especially surprising considering that women who attend events on national women’s day are most likely passionate about women’s empowerment to a certain degree. It seemed that women, and men, would rather vote for someone representing their tribe, than vote for a woman. Furthermore, that ‘someone’ is often a man.

In the same interview I conducted with Professor Andrews, mentioned above, I asked her about this affirmative action, and she said, *“We are taught that women don’t belong in politics, or in leadership, and the affirmative action doesn’t help much, because they’re just putting women in “women seats” that has to do with “women issues”. Which means that the one-third rule doesn’t do much.”* Andrews argued that because women are only placed in seats that are related to what men in power decide are women’s issues, as for instance reproductive health, their ability to make real change beyond that, is limited. Furthermore, she argued that tribalism is more entrenched in society than people would like to believe. She had thought that the younger generation in Nairobi would change this, but they still do not want to talk about tribal relations or politics in her classes in fear of offending someone. I noticed the same thing among my informants. Even though they were not very aware of tribes in their day to day lives among friends, their parents and families often identified more with their tribe, because many of them had grown up in rural Kenya, and then moved to Nairobi when they were adults.

### **“Women are their own worst enemies”**

A recurring sentence I heard in the field, both in relation to women in politics, but also when talking to people about feminism and women empowerment, was that women are their own worst enemies. This implies that they are primarily the ones that are standing in the way of empowering themselves and other women. Such a line of reasoning was most often brought up to me by men, as an explanation for why women are not yet equal, but I heard a surprising amount of women make the statement as well, for instance, in reference to why there were not more women in parliament, as discussed at the debate mentioned above. Because I heard so

many different people make the statement, I started asking my informants about their view on it. Helena said that, in her opinion, it was an exaggerated statement, but that there still was some truth to it,

*For example when I say that I don't want kids, women are quick to judge me and tell me why I'm wrong. It's like they think they know who I am, and that what I do will affect them. In cheating too, the woman is always blaming the other woman instead of blaming the man. But I don't know if I would say that they are enemies, because even if we were all friends, patriarchy would still rule.*

Her argument is that women are quick to shame each other for not wanting the same thing as they do, but that the problem does not lie with individuals, but primarily with the patriarchal system and structures that tell women (and men) how to behave. Alyssa expressed that she feels the whole thing had been blown out of proportion, and that it has become a phrase that people say without necessarily thinking it through. She continued, while rolling her eyes in response to the statement, *"They do say that women sometimes acts as guardians of the patriarchy, the invisible hand, but I honestly don't think that's true. When I look at my mom and my aunts, women are not enemies."*

Pierre Bourdieu's (2004 [2001]) argument concerning symbolic violence and patriarchal domination is interesting in relation to this discussion around women being their own enemies. He writes that one is wrong to think that women are themselves responsible for their own domination, and by suggesting that *"(...) they choose to adopt submissive practices ('women are their own worst enemies') or even that they love their own domination (...)"* (Bourdieu 2004 [2001]: 341). Bourdieu's argument, along the lines of Helena's statement, is rather that it is the objective structures that are at fault and enforcing these ideas and stereotypes of how a woman is supposed behave.

At almost every debate I went to concerning women empowerment or feminism, the question always arouse from the audience, most often from a man. Then, at a debate I attended in March, the question came from a woman and it made most of the women in the panel eager to respond. One of them, a middle-aged woman who was running for office in the national elections, responded, *"We keep talking about how women are enemies of themselves, but what about men? How come no one speaks of men as their own enemies, what do they do to be each other's friends?"* The whole audience cheered, laughed and clapped at her response. The

discussion went on, and one of the other women in the panel argued that the statement is patriarchal in its essence and that the first one ever to make it was most likely a man. Helena expressed a similar opinion tied to the idea that the statement is itself patriarchal,

*Men here don't want equality, they want to be able to oppress like the white man. How would they feel if the white man came here and told them, just get together and fix this among yourselves? It is the same principle with men telling women to fix it amongst ourselves.*

What is interesting with Helena's view, is that she ties the discourse back to colonialism, and anger towards it. She is comparing Kenyan men's oppression of women to Europe's oppression of Kenyans. Moreover, it exemplifies that her frustration is related to both men's misogyny, and the white man's oppression of Africans. It is an expression of how anger towards the white colonizers is still present in Nairobi today, as mentioned in the introduction.

### “Women here have fun”

*I struggle with academia and that sometimes it's so easy coming into your research with a condescending tone. I think I'm just tired of reading about us, and 'women in villages', and I want people to know that women here have fun, we are creative!*

Louise and I were eating lunch together at a fancy restaurant in Westlands, one of the more upper class areas of Nairobi, and talking about conducting scientific research, when she said the statement quoted above. We shared the same sentiments concerning the representation of African women in academic texts, and she was frustrated that no one ever writes about anything other than 'Maasai villages or HIV/AIDS'. Louise said that she wants to read books about Africa that are focusing more on urbanity and on the positive aspects of life in African countries, and she urged me to focus on that as well.

The fact that we were having the conversation in this expensive restaurant, and that Louise comes from a relatively wealthy family that are able to send her to college in The United States, shows how class naturally plays a big part in deciding one's life and opportunities. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the things they did to enjoy themselves and under which circumstances they felt liberated. These things were often highly related to

consumption, and as Bourdieu (1986) and Liechty (2003) would argue, a way for a middle class person to distinguish oneself from others. Liechty emphasizes how the making of a middle class in large part has to do with the performance and narratives of a class culture (2003: 25). In tune with Bourdieu and Liechty's argument is Spronk (2012) who writes that "*A young professional subculture has developed that displays a vibrant cosmopolitan consumer culture*" in Nairobi (Spronk 2012: 76), and the same can be argued in regards to the networks my informants were part of.

As mentioned in the introduction, going out to bars, like The Alchemist, was a big part of young people's lives in Nairobi, and thereby a big part of my life as a researcher. The clubs can be viewed as sort of a 'free zone' where norms and restrictions of general society do not apply, especially for women. During the day, women might feel obligated to dress and act modestly, because of street harassment discussed above, but when they went out, they could wear whatever they pleased, and this often entailed short skirts or dresses. The atmosphere at The Alchemist was like no other place in Nairobi, where my informants felt that they could express their true selves without judgement. I was there with Jamila at an event in March, called "Thrift Social" and on that day, I realised the significance of a venue like that. I wrote the following in my field notes:

*When I was walking into The Alchemist with Jamila and her sister, I was amazed at how liberated (and stylish) everyone looked, and for the first time since I arrived in Nairobi, I saw men and women being openly gay, not hiding their sexuality - this was a place where they could be themselves.*

The alchemist functioned as a free space, at least for people that were part of the creative scene, and it was a place where 'social capital' (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]) ruled. It was a main spot for meeting friends and building new networks. For my informants within the creative scene, it was also a space where they could display their new content (art, poems, fashion, music), and thereby getting it out to a larger crowd. In chapter four, I will discuss how feminism within the creative scene was a way of gaining social capital, and how performing your feminism can be seen as a form of consumption.

Even though The Alchemist is open to everyone in theory, where attendance is free on most days of the week, it is mainly a space for people of the middle class. There might be two possible reasons for this. The first one is because going out to bars or clubs and buying

alcoholic beverages is expensive, and secondly that this bar in particular is perceived by many as a 'Western' space, that many do not associate themselves with. Thus, this 'free zone' that The Alchemist offers, is in many ways a freedom that has to be purchased, therefore limited to people who can afford it. However, since it is also a place where social capital rules, it could possibly also work as an alternative to economic capital. The creative scene often values creative content above money, therefore, if you are creating something 'cool', you might actually gain access either way. Related to this discussion is performative feminism as social capital and a way of distinction. I will discuss this further in chapter four.

### Summary: class matters

Class is, and will be, a recurring theme throughout this thesis, and as is clear by now, the women I did research among were part of what I have loosely defined as the middle class, and their experiences of being young women is largely related to the class they grew up in, or are now a part of. The current class position is most often a result of their family's background. Education and class are interconnected, and since education is expensive in Kenya, families who can afford to send their children to university are often part of the middle – or upper classes.

In the discussion surrounding male street harassers, class can give the women a certain upper hand, because they are higher up the ladder than the men harassing them, and they are thereby not facing any structural consequences if they tell them off. Thus, as opposed to the case of male professors harassing female students, the women here have some sort of power over the men. They can choose to ignore it, without it having any large effect on their lives. Another aspect is that these uneducated men seem to be the ones that feel most threatened by women's empowerment and left feeling neglected and ignored. Masculinities and feeling of neglect is discussed further in the final chapter. Moreover, my informants' opportunities to 'have fun' and be creative are also largely dependent on class. Thus, they are manifesting their class status through education, but also through consumption; eating in certain places, going out to clubs and wearing trendy clothes.

In this chapter, I have outlined and discussed what it is like being a young urban woman in Nairobi, based on a small sample of topics. It is worth mentioning that these are only a few of

the factors that affect a young woman's life, but they were chosen based on what my informants emphasized as aspects which limited or improved their lives. As will be clear in the forthcoming chapters, these factors play a part in my informants' views on women empowerment, feminism and of the men in their lives. In the following chapter, I will discuss the different ways my informants problematized feminism and feminist identity and how they felt that the concept often did not fit the context of Nairobi, or feared potential stigma from being labelled a feminist.



## Chapter three: Problematizing feminism

*“I think that’s a big thing to recognize about African countries - that we’re doing the work without the word. Cause feminism is a western term, not necessarily a western concept, but the word.” (Louise)*

This chapter deals with different ways of problematizing feminism and the feminist identity and how it, in many cases, does not seem to fit the local context. It discusses reluctance towards the concept that has to do with its ‘Western’ origin, and with the negative connotations attached to the word. I argue that the fear of being subject to a stereotype, based on the social stigmas attached to the label of feminism, might keep women from identifying with it. However, I still wish to show that not wanting to identify as a feminist is not synonymous with not believing in gender equity. Furthermore, this chapter investigates how the concept of ‘women empowerment’ might be easier to identify with because it is something one can merely support, without it becoming a marker of one’s identity. I also look at how not wanting to identify as a feminist might be rooted in different views of what a woman is supposed to be and a difference in values surrounding the topic. In addition, I discuss how my informants are problematizing their own feminist identities, which are contextual and continually changing based on the situations they find themselves in. It is worth mentioning that this - and the next chapter, “Developing Feminism(s)” are highly interconnected, where the latter can be seen as a continuation of this current one.

### “Feminists are angry women who hate men”

There were many reasons why my non-feminist informants did not identify with the word, but the recurring one I heard was that feminism was not an African or Kenyan concept; it was something pertaining to (white) “Western” women and did not fit in the Kenyan context. Many women could not relate to feminists, because they only knew of foreign ones, or did not know much about feminism at all. Which is very much in tune with hooks’ (2000) argument that women of colour do not feel that they belong in the movement. Many of my informants, associated feminists with angry women and with wanting to fight men. The notion that feminists are angry, is not an exclusively Kenyan phenomenon, but can arguably be found almost every place where the concept exists. In Donna Murdock’s ethnography, “When

women have wings” (2008) on feminism in Colombia, she writes something similar about her informants having issues with the term: “(...) *one of the young Centre women distanced herself from that term because she felt it was ‘like a fight against the system, against men, and we were not fighting with anyone’*” (Murdock 2008: 78-79).

I talked to several women at USIU, The international university at the outskirts of Nairobi where the female Professor mentioned in the previous chapter worked, and none of them identified with feminism. One of my key informants, Joy, was no exception. The first time I met her, we were in another student’s apartment, and she arrived dancing into the living room with earphones plugged in, wearing a beautiful dress. She is originally from South-Sudan, with the characteristic long, lean body, and beautiful features. Joy is the kind of young woman that radiates confidence and autonomy. You can instantly see that she does not let anyone tell her what to do.

I remember asking her on that first day, what she thought of feminism, and she responded: “*Feminism is about segregating the opposite gender from your own. You’re more into always supporting women*”. Joy did not identify with feminism at all, and believed that African women should keep some of their traditional values. She expected, for example, that her family received “dowry” (bridal price), when she married, because that is common in South-Sudanese culture. I met with Joy regularly over the next months, but she never wanted to talk much about women empowerment or women’s rights. She was comfortable in her life as a woman, and had everything she needed, so she did not see the problem. Her whole way of being signalled confidence, so she did not understand the need to talk about it all the time. I noticed this with many women I met, that they were rather uninterested in talking about things that did not concern them. Thus, if they personally had access to everything they needed, they did not think about the fact that many other women did not. This is a sign of privilege; because you cannot see it, you think that it does not happen.

What is important to underline, is that it is not always the one or the other; that you are either a feminist, or not concerned with equal rights at all. I had other informants who were passionate about women empowerment without being feminists, like Amina, who stated:

*I don’t know. I’m not into labels. I wouldn’t like to be labelled a feminist. In Nairobi, I feel like it’s more about fighting men. They want to be heard more than they need to be listened to. I know as a woman you need to stand up for yourself and make it known to*

*other young girls, that you can make it on your own, even in a very patriarchal society - but feminism is crazy in Nairobi, I feel like they don't understand what it is – it's more of a fight than a conversation.*

As opposed to other women who do not want to identify with feminism because they only associate it with angry, *white* women, Amina feels that feminism in Nairobi, in particular, is the problem; Kenyan feminism, in her view, has gone too far. She might be referring to how many of her feminist friends (many of them were also my informants) are often very vocal about their feminisms, and therefore might come off as a bit aggressive. Furthermore, Amina is a very quiet young woman, which also might have an effect on her experience with feminism. Either way, Amina knows very well what feminism is, and what it in her opinion should be about, but the way it is being enacted and expressed in Nairobi is not something that she wants to identify with.

Eve shared similar sentiments, and the following conversation occurred during a dinner at a restaurant one evening. She said she had become more aware of the struggles women face when she started studying mechanical engineering, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but that even if she was a fighter for women empowerment, she did not want to call herself a feminist.

*In Kenya, you either support it, or you really don't. Me, I'm not a feminist, cause it has a lot of negative connotations about women looking down on men, believing that they are superior, and that's a bad view. No gender is superior to the other. I don't really believe that that's what feminism is, but that's what people think when they hear the word. I'm for women empowerment, but I'm not a feminist.*

What one can interpret from her statement is that Eve is agreeing with what she perceives to be the core of feminism, but cannot identify with the word because of how other people perceive it. In many instances, the fear that people will judge you, or think you are something that you are not, might hold some women back. Instead, they preferred to not be labelled at all. Eve seemed on the fence about feminism, negotiating with herself about what it really meant.

After she had answered the question, she asked me if I could just explain to her what feminism 'really' was. I was hesitant to talk about my personal understanding of feminism in the beginning of fieldwork, but then after a while, I increasingly stopped worrying so much

about it. Therefore, when Eve asked I told her that to me, feminism in its simplest sense was about fighting for gender equity and wanting all men and women, regardless of race or class, to have the same opportunities in life. Upon which Eve then smiled, and said, “*Ok, well then, that’s simple*”. Eve did not say anything about whether or not she would now start identifying as a feminist, and my aim was naturally not to ‘convert’ anyone, but it would be interesting to know.

I would argue that, in regards to Eve and Amina, reluctance towards feminism might have to do with the fear of facing potential stigma by the majority who do not approve of feminism. Goffman’s (1963) theory on stigma, and how society has certain stereotypes of what a given type of individual should be, can possibly help shed light on why some women are hesitant to identify with feminism. Goffman argues that there is a divide between an individual’s real social identity, and the one others perceive based on those stereotypes. An individual might then either try to fit in and alternate parts of her identity, or rise above the negative stereotypes, and keep her real identity (Goffman 1963: 13-18).

Thus, women like Eve and Amina, who identify to some extent with the concept, but not the word because of the social stigma attached to it, choose not to call themselves feminists in fear of being looked at differently. Another example of social stigma could be the statements made at the bureaucratic official’s office, which also serves as the title of this thesis. When I mentioned the word feminism to him, the whole dynamic of the room changed. It was as if he went from seeing me as a young woman who could do no harm, to seeing me as some sort of threat. When he raised his voice saying, “*feminism is an alien concept in Kenya*”, I felt that I could see the anger in his eyes. I met with him one more time during my stay, on a morning in the beginning of May. When I sat down in front of his desk, he asked me bluntly, “*So, what do you need help with? You probably only want to talk to radical feminists, right?*” I answered that no, I am just interested in talking to women about empowerment and feminism, not necessarily ‘radical feminists’. Regardless of what I responded, his view of me had already settled.

Although this particular middle-aged man does not represent the Kenyan male population in general, it paints a picture of reactions women might get when stating that they are feminists. They might therefore be afraid to step into the wild territory that feminism is often portrayed as. bell hooks states that many women are reluctant to advocate feminism because they are uncertain about the meaning of the term, whereas some women “*fear the word ‘feminism’*”

*because they shun identification with any political movement, especially one perceived as radical.*” (2000: 24-25). My informants could be examples of both.

The idea of feminists as angry and haters of men is, as mentioned, not an exclusively Kenyan phenomenon, but it is still an interesting point to elaborate on in this specific context. I would argue that not wanting to be perceived as a certain type of woman is tied to societal expectations and pressures women face, as discussed in the previous chapter. Since many women learn while growing up that the most important thing is finding a husband and building a family, they might think that calling oneself a feminist would stand in the way of living up to these expectations. Furthermore, a woman should not be too educated, because that will scare a potential man away, and if this is the case, then these men might not even dare to come near a feminist. Since a common reason for not wanting to identify with feminism is the idea that the movement’s main objective is fighting with men, and then society tells young women that they need to find a man to be successful, it is not surprising that they might not want to identify with this particular movement.

## Women empowerment instead of feminism

One morning in early February, I was talking to Carol, a woman in her fifties that ran a little laundry around the corner from where I lived. I asked her about feminism and she told me the following, *«There is feminism here in Kenya, of course, but it’s called women empowerment. There is a hesitation to call things feminist - we have women groups instead. People avoid the word»*. In other words, Carol is saying that feminism exists, just under a different name - in disguise, very similar to Mohanty’s argument about engaging with feminism, but rejecting the word (2003: 50). A reason why women empowerment might be easier to identify with is the fact that it is something you believe in, not something you *are*. Whereas when you identify as a feminist, it somehow seems as if it becomes your identity, and it then comes with certain attributes attached. I will discuss feminist identity in the forthcoming chapter. Thus, you can say that you are *for* women empowerment, without it necessarily having a larger effect on how people view you.

hooks argues that the feminist movement might benefit from changing the linguistic structure from “I am a feminist” to “I advocate feminism”, thereby avoiding the notion that feminism is

tied to absolutism and an essential identity. By saying that you advocate something, you are simply committed to making a change, but not necessarily changing your whole identity (hooks 2000: 31). In other words, women empowerment might function in the same way in the context of Nairobi or Kenya, because you only have to be a supporter of women empowerment, it is not who you are as an individual. Kolawole (2002) argues that feminism in an African context is difficult, and comments on how many women and men reject the word because of its western origin. She proposes the use of “womanism” instead of feminism, and emphasises that *“People should be free to name the struggle as they desire and get on with achieving the goal of gender equity, making African women more visible in all sectors, and playing transformational roles for social change”* (Kolawole 2002: 97). Thus, her point is that the label is not as important as the actual fight for women’s empowerment.

Furthermore, she writes about how a new focus on women empowerment emerged in Nairobi after the United Nations Women conference was held in the city in 1985. The conference was a turning point in gender awareness in Kenya and Africa, and brought women empowerment on the agenda. Kolawole argues that although this was of great importance, it still did not necessarily make African women more inclined to accept feminism as a concept (2002: 94).

I visited many different women empowerment organizations during my fieldwork, and I often asked the women working there about feminism, but many were hesitant to answer. Then on the other hand, when I asked them about women empowerment, they were most often intrigued and eager to talk. One example is Elisabeth, the leader of the education and empowerment organization, whom I mentioned in the previous chapter. She said, *“Empowerment is an act of enabling a woman so that she can take care of herself financially, physically and socially. It is also about having equal rights”*. Elisabeth’s view of women empowerment is very similar to a simple definition of what feminism might be, but when I asked her about this and her view of feminism, she did not understand what I meant. It might be possible that Elisabeth and I misunderstood each other, but in her answer, it was as if she did not know the word. Which means that there is not only a reluctance because of negative connotations, but sometimes also because one does not know the word. It is worth mentioning that I rarely, possibly only this one time, met people in Nairobi who did not know what feminism was. Most people were at least familiar with the word, even if they disapproved or did not know much about the movement.

## Emphasizing different values

It often seemed that reasons for not wanting to identify with feminism was rooted in different ideas of what it meant to be a woman, more specifically, an African woman. This ties back to the discussion earlier, concerning feminism as a ‘Western’ concept, but with even more emphasis on certain ‘traditional values’. Graeber writes that values, in the sociological sense, are concerned with ideas of the desirable, which “*refers not simply to what people actually want - in practice, people want all sorts of things. Values are ideas about what they ought to want.*” (2001: 3). Thus, there are existing values and ideas of how society, and relations between men and women should be, which does not coincide with their ideas of “the feminist identity”. Spronk discusses how her young informants in Nairobi viewed this idea of ‘traditional’ versus ‘Western’ values, and that a praising of traditional Kenyan cultural heritage often was used as defence against implementing something they saw as ‘Western’ (2012: 84-85). This is very similar to what I experienced among several of my informants, and I will outline two views of this below.

I conducted two informal interviews, with women whom I would argue are part of the lower middle class of Nairobi. Because of a number of circumstances, I met these informants properly only one time, but they both shared interesting views concerning this intersection between personal values and feminism. Dalia, whom I met at an event dedicated to the celebration and empowerment of female artists, said that she strongly believed in women empowerment, but she still felt that women should be submissive in relation to men, “*Be traditional, but not brain dead*”. She continued to say, “*Women should have the opportunity to reach their full potential, but they still have to complement the man, not compete with him.*” Dalia’s whole way of being was different from any of my other informants. She was less outgoing and more quiet and shy. In her comment about being traditional, she ties submissiveness to traditional values, values that she wishes to keep. Her view of women empowerment in relation to feminism is similar to Joy’s and Eve’s, but she puts even more emphasis on ‘traditional’ values. Furthermore, this idea of complementing a man, ties back to the discussion concerning finding a husband, or not wanting to scare men away.

Alexandra, a woman I met at the beginning of fieldwork through a women empowerment organization, had similar views concerning the topic. She was doing volunteer work as a young leader in an organization, and stated that even though she was an advocate for women’s liberation, she felt that a certain trend had started to emerge where women did not

care about men anymore and that they are choosing freedom over finding a husband. Alexandra was against this and thought it was backwards, that it would not bring society in the right direction, “*for development to work, we need both sexes.*” What Alexandra is expressing here, concerning the fact that women do not care about men anymore, could arguably be tied back to the discussion in the previous chapter, on how my feminist informants do not want a husband if he is not able to keep up with their autonomous identities. This will be discussed further in relation to dating preferences in chapter five. Both Alexandra’s and Dalia’s views deviate from many of my other informants, especially the feminists presented in the next chapter. This might have something to do with the fact that none of the informants presented in this chapter, except from Amina, payed much attention to mass – or social media from outside of Africa, and did not go to any of the same places as people who were more open towards feminism. These factors might play a role in regards to the likelihood of identifying with feminism, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

### “Does feminism belong in a Kenyan context?” – A debate

While Eve and I were sitting in a restaurant, having the discussion mentioned previously in this chapter, Ronny, a young man whom Eve knew, came by to say hi. She introduced us, and Eve later told me that he had started a monthly debate forum where young women and men could discuss political and social matters, and that this month’s topic was feminism. I was very excited, and looked forward to attending the audience. I then got a call from Ronny a couple of days later, where he asked me if I could be in the panel, and share my current findings on feminism in Nairobi. I was undecided on the matter for a while, going over the ethical implications, and how being in the panel might have a negative impact on my position in the field. I was worried that the audience might view me as some sort of “white”<sup>3</sup> saviour’, there to lecture them about feminism. After seeking guidance from Ronny, and some of my informants, I decided to do it, and I did not at all regret my decision. It turned out to be a unique way for me to gather insight from a broad range of people I would not have been able to hear from any other way. During the past months, I had been to a few debates, like the ones mentioned in the previous chapter, where feminism was one of the topics, but these debates were usually organized by European organizations, and the majority of the audience were

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<sup>3</sup> «White» because of my background as half Nigerian, but still seen as a white ‘Westerner’ in Nairobi.

often white. I was intrigued that I had finally come across a debate organized by, and for, Kenyans, and when I arrived, I only saw one white person in the audience.

The debate was more of a conversation between the audience and the panel than a formal debate, which made the discussion even more interesting. We were three women and two men in the panel, and with a female moderator. The majority of the audience were women, but a surprisingly high amount of men was there as well. The two other women identified as feminists, but the men did not. In the opening statements, we were asked to define what feminism meant to us, and one of the men said that he felt feminism was about to die out on a global basis, as it was no longer relevant or even existent. A young man in the audience complained that the packaging was faulty – that if women in Nairobi wanted to get the message across, they would need to express themselves in a better way, without being angry. The women in the audience did not agree with his statement at all, and in a typical Kenyan fashion, emotions were expressed loudly. One of them responded, visibly annoyed, “*We did not start out angry, but when you try to be heard time and time again, and no one listens, then eventually you get angry*”. The interaction between this man and woman in the audience is in many ways a representation of how feminism is perceived among young people in Nairobi, where the idea of feminists being angry is at the core of the discourse. The young woman’s response resonated with a majority of the women in the audience and the panel - myself included. There were several women in the audience that did not identify as feminists and one of them, who was Ronny’s younger sister, said that she agreed on everything concerning women empowerment, but that she still could not call herself a feminist.

The debate on feminism gave me a clearer view of the big picture when it comes to understanding the complicated leap from just being *for* women empowerment, to potentially taking a step and actually calling yourself a feminist. Up until this debate in May, I had only been participating in discussions of feminism in smaller groups or with one or two informants at a time. This big gathering, where everyone who attended was concerned with the research topic, gave me an opportunity to confirm some of the assumptions that had sprung up during fieldwork concerning the ambivalent relationship many had with feminism. Furthermore, the debate also sums up the discourse presented in the sections above.

## Contextual identities

### The idea of ‘the feminist’

Whether one identifies as a feminist or not, it is common to think that this comes with certain ideas of how that person is supposed to act, look like or talk, which come attached with this label. For instance, as referred to in the beginning of this chapter, many think of feminists as angry with men or just angry in general. If one identifies as a feminist, there might be a notion that this individual is supposed to dislike or not approve of certain things, just based upon the fact that you identify as a feminist. Helena told me that she often found it difficult to navigate these preconceptions, and characteristics that a feminist is supposed to have. She said, *“Being a feminist means that I continually have to construct my identity. Like, can I like rap-music, and still be a feminist? If I want to be delicate and vulnerable with a man, am I allowed to be that, and still be a feminist?”* In relation to why many of my informants did not identify with feminism because of the negative connotations associated with the label, the women who do identify as feminists might stop doing so because they feel that certain things in their lives do not coincide with their idea of what a feminist is supposed to be like.

Being a feminist in a country like Kenya, where feminism is not widely accepted means that you continually have to defend yourself and your identity to others who do not identify with feminism, which most likely make up the majority of the population. Helena said this, jokingly, about her experience: *“If you’re a feminist in Nairobi, you need a support group! Haha, I don’t know, maybe I’ve been wrong all along, maybe misogyny is the shit?”* Her statement is linked to the ones discussed above, where people have preconceptions tied to what it means to be a feminist, and thereby, they often react negatively when they find out she is one. The difference between this discussion, and the one mentioned in the previous paragraphs, is that while the former has to do with your personal identity, the latter is concerned with how others view you. Alyssa told me that men often saw her as a troublemaker, or viewed it as a challenge to domesticate her, when she told them she was a feminist. This, and Helena’s point, is related to the stigma attached to the word ‘feminist’, and how people connect certain characteristics to the word and thereby to that individual’s personal identity.

## Fluid identities

The feminist identity not a constant one and one might move away from feminism towards something different. My informant, Zola, is an example of this. I was visiting her apartment one night and we were talking about the concept of 'African feminism', and intersectionality, when she told me that she no longer wanted to call herself a feminist. She felt that the way the movement had been mobilized was too exclusionary and not comprehensive enough to account for the damage that patriarchy has done. I would argue that when Zola is saying that feminism is exclusionary, she is referring to a lack of intersectionality. This is very much in tune with bell hooks' criticism of feminism in The United States; that it is excluding African-American women's struggles and battles, because white women inherently dominate the movement (2000). Zola continued saying,

*I also think feminism is ignoring the deeper ways of how we relate to one another. The question should be, 'Why is capitalism valuing certain people's bodies more', instead of 'Why aren't women getting equal pay?' How can we work together to reconstruct the system that oppress all of us, in the name of uplifting women?*

I asked her if she did not think that intersectional feminism could account for this as well, and she answered, "Well, it can, but [in practice] it doesn't." Zola also added another reason for not wanting to call herself a feminist. We were sitting in the living room with her lover, Thomas, and she said that part of the reason she had come to her realisation was her newfound love for a man. Zola had never been attracted to men before, and used to have a lot of anger against them,

*[B]ut now, in the last two weeks, so much has changed. I have gotten to know the hearts of so many men. I used to start off from a place of scepticism, but when you stop thinking of people as a certain gender, it stops. We need to see people at their unique intersections, and I don't feel that that's where intersectional feminism is right now, 'cause it's still just a lot of straight women.*

What the conversation with Zola shows is that a reluctance to identify with feminism not necessarily has to do with lack of awareness, or fear of stigma and negative connotations attached to the word. In some instances, it is also because one feels that the concept is too narrow and not progressive enough. It also shows that it is possible to move from being a feminist to not being one, and not the other way around, which might most often be the case.

The importance of intersectionality among the feminists in Nairobi will be one of the main topics in the next chapter. Furthermore, what Zola is expressing in the second quote about straight women dominating feminism, is very much in tune with Butler's argument that contemporary feminism is still too focused on essentialism, i.e. that the characteristics of what it means to be female and male are stalling the ideology's development (Butler 1990). In Butler's view, however, gender is a fluid performance, similar to what Zola is describing. The same can be said of Helena's reflections above, on 'feminist attributes', which are also tied to the idea of essentialism, but she found ways to overcome this, by confining in the idea that feminist identity is fluid, and that it all depended on the context she found herself in.

### Frontstage and backstage in a feminist's life

Another important aspect related to contextual feminist identities is that there are some situations in these young women's lives, where speaking up or showing resistance is not accepted at all. The following discussion is based on stories they told me about the difficulties tied to being a feminist out in 'the streets' but still having to be submissive when you returned home. This can be seen in relation to Rosaldo's (1974), albeit somewhat controversial theory on how women are often seen as closer to the domestic sphere, thereby responsible for things that go on in the home. Even though it is common for women (also the parent-generation of my informants) to have formal jobs outside the home in contemporary Nairobi, the idea of a woman's role being primarily in the home is still very much present.

Jamila lived with her parents, older brother and younger sister. She told me that no matter the degree of personal feminism, how much she talked to her friends about it or wrote on social media, her parents did not share her views.

*It's weird when you're into a current so much, and you're out there talking about feminism, but still at home, I won't say anything. You're not practicing what you're preaching, cause I'll still come home and go straight to the kitchen and start cooking, even if my brother has been home the whole day.*

Jamila's quote shows the tension between generations, or what my informants referred to as 'traditional' versus 'modern' ideas of a male/female relationship. It is still common in Kenyan culture for the women to cook for the men, and if the mother is not home, then the

responsibility falls on the eldest daughter. Even if Jamila does not support it, she still has to follow the rules and respect 'tradition'. What is interesting is that this respect for people older than herself depends on the situation. One night we went to a debate together, and on our way out of the venue, she got into a relatively fiery discussion with a man that was probably almost double her age. The argument was about women's rights, and why Kenya needed feminism. In that situation she was not at all afraid to tell him off, but then, there would not be any larger consequences to her actions, beyond making the man frustrated. With her parents, and the incidence of sexual harassment from her professor, discussed in chapter two, however, showing resistance could potentially ruin relationships and have a larger impact on her life.

Louise told me about a similar experience where she had an argument with her dad about feminism. She started blogging two years ago, and did a post about the male gaze, and the experience women have with men harassing them on the 'matatu'<sup>4</sup>. Her dad had found the blog post and got angry with Louise for writing about the matter publicly. She told me he yelled at her, and said

*'Why are you complaining about this? Can't you just let it be, this is Kenya. You and your feminism...' And I told him 'yes, I am a feminist', but he doesn't think that feminism belongs here, that it's not our tradition. And that is shocking to me, because he is more than educated enough.*

Louise seemed bothered that her dad could not keep up with where Kenyan society is heading in terms of women's empowerment, because this is someone close to her, someone that she loves, but the fact that not even her family understands and agrees with something that seems so basic, to her, is troubling. Her comment on education is also interesting, because to her that seems to be a factor linked to being a supporter for, if not feminism, then at least, women empowerment.

Alyssa expressed how she was two different people when she was visiting her family in the village and when she was in Nairobi. She said that when she was in her childhood home she had to fit her time and life around what was happening in the kitchen: "*Where do I wanna go, ok. But first I have to prepare people's meals.*" Alyssa said that since she has moved away from home, and got her own apartment, she does not cook anymore because that reminds her

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<sup>4</sup> The name of the small public busses in Nairobi.

of the expectations people have of her has a woman: “*The way I see myself and the way society sees me are two different things*”.

The examples of Jamila, Louise and Alyssa, shows how young women have to alter or downplay certain parts of their identities depending on the situation. Erving Goffman’s (1959) theory on how social interaction can be viewed as a performance where one plays a role, is interesting in terms of my informants’ act of concealment or highlighting, based on which spaces they found themselves in. In this performance, the individual is in what Goffman calls the ‘front-stage’, whereas ‘back-stage’, is where one can take off her ‘mask’ and be her true self (1959: 114). In this instance, situations with kin, or at university, can be seen as ‘front-stage’, where they have to put on a performance that seems fake, and hide certain parts of their identities. Whereas, ‘back-stage’, might be when they are hanging out with friends, or in feminist networks, with likeminded people.

bell hooks criticises the feminist movement for not taking family life into account when talking about the liberation of women. She writes, “*The bourgeois woman can repudiate family without believing that by doing so she relinquishes the possibility of relationship, care, protection. If all else fails, she can buy care*” (hooks 2000: 39). Whilst for women of colour and/or lower classes, they do not have de option of delineating their families if they do not support their feminist choices and lifestyles (hooks 2000: 39). This is along the same lines of what my informants are experiencing, where they are still dependent on their families to have shelter and money for their education tuition. The concealing of feminist identities in certain settings illustrates how the label of feminism is problematized in Nairobi, and how feminists have to figure out ways of navigating their feminisms depending on the context.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined and discussed reasons why young women have trouble identifying with feminism as a concept and as a marker of identity. One of these reasons is that feminism is perceived to be a western term, for white women, and many women of colour therefore feel that there is no room for them in the movement. Furthermore, I have shown how ambivalence or resistance towards feminism, in most instances, does not have to do with ignorance or not wanting to advocate for women’s rights and empowerment. It might rather

have to do with the fear of, or reluctance towards, being perceived by society as angry, someone who wants to compete with men, or just dislike men in general. I have argued that this fear of being stigmatized and viewed as someone who does not like men, might be rooted in society's expectations towards women, and the pressure it puts on them to find a husband to be complete or successful. Women empowerment might be easier to identify with because it does not have the same negative connotations attached to it, and it is something you only have to identify *with*, not *as*. Moreover, I have discussed how a difference in personal values, often viewed as 'traditional', has an effect on your view of feminism. Lastly, I have investigated how being a feminist in Nairobi results in a shifting of identities in certain contexts, and how one's relatives or friends do not support or understand their choice to identify with the concept.

The next chapter, which as mentioned is a continuation of this one, is concerned with how feminists in Nairobi continually negotiate their fluid, feminist identities, and develop a view of the concept and movement that is different from what they view as white or 'Western' feminism. Their reasons for developing their own forms of feminism, with emphasis on intersectionality, are a result of the problems with identifying with the concept at all, as discussed in this chapter.



# Chapter four: Developing feminisms

This chapter engages with intersectional feminisms and contextual and fluid identities. It focuses on my feminist informants and the different ways their feminist identities have developed, are being enacted, expressed and continually negotiated. Their negotiation of feminist identities and their interpretations of the concept are highly connected to the problematizing of feminism, as discussed in the previous chapter. I argue that young women within the creative scene are in large part the biggest contributors to the development of feminism(s) in their networks, and I will outline reasons for why that might be. I will discuss the importance of intersectionality and how my informants emphasized the need for an African feminism. Furthermore, I will also describe how globalization, social media, books and role models are important contributors to the spread and implementation of the concept in Nairobi. I discuss the idea of performative feminism, and how this can be seen as a form of consumption, but also how the performance might contribute to making the concept more accessible and normalized.

## The creative scene and feminism

The creative scene, or also called “creatives” among themselves, are a group of young people in Nairobi who are, in one capacity or another, doing creative work. This being music, art, poetry, fashion design, modelling, photography or stylist work – anything can become a career. Their social status is largely determined by consumption and style, but also controversy. I was drawn to this group of people from the very start, but did not have a way of getting access to them. I just followed their different gatherings or events on social media. Then, after getting to know Jamila and Kate in particular, the gate into the creative community was open. All of a sudden, I discovered a new part of Nairobi, and saw first-hand how these people stood out from the rest of the population, as I mentioned in chapter two. Among them, one can be whomever she or he wants to be, and the goal is to be as controversial as possible. This being in your opinions, in the way you dress, and in the creative work you may be engaged in. They are in many ways inspired by culture outside of their country, and their continent, and are constantly setting new trends. My impression was not that they wanted to be like Europeans or Americans, for example; they were simply taking

parts of culture and fashion from all around the world, and mixing it with Kenyan culture. According to Tsing (2005), global movements are always filled with friction, and implementation of different concepts or trends, never form the exact same meaning in a new place.

My argument is that the women within the creative scene were more likely to explore feminist ideas and inspiration than other women in Kenya might be, because of this passion for setting new trends and standing out. Feminists elsewhere inspired them, through the mass media, for instance, but they were not just adopting western feminist ideals, instead they were recreating these ideas to fit their context. Appadurai states that this consumption of the media, because of globalisation, creates agency, and with it selectivity and resistance (1996: 7). I argued in the theoretical framework, that feminism could be what Tsing calls an ‘activist package’ (2005: 227), that enter new fields of meaning when brought to a new location. For it to make a difference, and be implemented in that new location it needs to be translated in such a way that it adheres to the locals’ life worlds. In the forthcoming parts of the chapter, I will explore these ways of creating locally adjusted feminisms, both by excluding what does not fit the context, and by putting added focus on what does.

## Resistance towards ‘Western’ influence

*I am a feminist, and no disrespect to white people, but the things they fight for – their struggles – are so far away from what we deal with over here. A friend of mine who has moved to the United States told me that some women there were upset about the fact that the mirrors in men and women’s bathrooms were not equal sizes. What type of cause is that? That’s just such a silly thing to fight for!*

Jamila told me this on our first lunch together, just a few days after I first met her at The Alchemist in the middle of February. We were sitting in one of the Java cafés, one of the biggest restaurant and café chains in Kenya. They all look the same, very clean and stylish, and the prices are relatively high, compared to other cafés in Nairobi. Going to Java is a way of showing your class status through consumption, and as Donner (2015) and Liechty (2003) have pointed out, a marker for the middle class. Jamila’s statement above, illustrates how she feels a need to distance herself from what she sees as a ‘Western’ form of feminism, where

‘those people over there’ have come a lot further than her country. Thus, the feminism comes with a ‘but’ attached. Walby writes something similar about this need to distance yourself, but still identifying with parts of it, by saying “*I am not a feminist, but...*” (2011: 3). With Jamila, it is the other way around, she is identifying with the word, but not with everyone’s view of the concept. The ‘activist package’ (Tsing 2005: 227) needs to be altered to fit the location. Her personal feminism is as follows: “*For me, feminism is about everyone having equal rights, not only women having rights.*”

Jamila, with passion and frustration in her eyes, continued on to say that feminism in Kenya is filled with ambivalence, or even ignorance, “*a lot of people don’t even know about feminism here*”. To elaborate on her point, she told me about an incident that had happened when she was walking in the international women’s march in January, and carrying a sign that said, “*Smash the patriarchy!*” Moreover, how several people came over to her, and asked what the patriarchy meant and those who did know what it was, got angry with her for carrying a sign like that. “*This is ignorance, and our whole social system is built upon it. People just do things unknowingly because it’s what comes naturally to them, and this is contributing to women’s subordination and the patriarchy*”. Jamila’s experience with people getting angry with her for expressing her feminism, can be seen in relation to the stigma attached to the concept, as discussed in the previous chapter. Jamila knows that her actions will cause negative reactions, but she chooses to do it regardless of how people will react. A while later, Jamila and I attended a debate on feminism and how to empower Kenyan women. The shared opinion among many of the women in the panel was the will and the need to rise up on their own, without outside help. One of the women said:

*The West does not want an organized women’s movement in Africa. We need to invest our energy here, in local organizations; we cannot have external powers coming to define us. We need to speak of our identity as women, as Kenyans as Africans. We need help internationally, but we need first to reach out to our fellow Kenyan women, and when we have our own identity, we can seek help.*

In other words, their reason for not wanting to just adopt what they see as ‘Western’ feminism, can be seen as twofold. On the one hand, there is the argument that white feminism does not account for their issues and their struggles, and on the other, the reason is manifested in an unwillingness to just adopt what they see as western culture without question. This is, as mentioned in the introduction, arguably because of their colonial past and the colonial

structures that are still present in contemporary Kenya. bell hooks' (2000) argument, that African-American women have been reluctant to identify as feminists because white women have dominated the discourse for too long, and thereby not accounting for intersectional struggles, is a reasoning closely tied to how my informants wanted to distance themselves from a 'Western' kind of feminism. Even though the racial discrimination and tension within a country like The United States, is different from tensions between countries, the argument still applies. After all, Kenya does not exist in a vacuum, unaffected by what is happening other places in the world, especially in relation to their colonial past.

## Intersectionality and 'African feminism'

*"The argument that 'we are all women together' clearly doesn't address the issue of racism, because it merely subsumes the issue of race under an argument about the primacy of gender"* (Moore 1988: 192).

Because of hesitation towards adopting this 'Western' feminism, there is a need for an alternative. In other words, an activist package that makes sense at a local level, and role models (specifically black feminists) that inspire other women, and make the concept more inclusive, i.e. intersectional. One afternoon Helena was making lunch for us, and I asked her how she felt about African and black feminism. She answered that she identifies with both, but that black feminist is a broader term, while African feminist describes the local situation better: *"I'm calling myself an African feminist, cause we're still fighting the basics here. So it's a different experience, and the distinction is very important, cause feminism is different everywhere."* She then went on to explain that when she was in Japan, she could walk around wearing whatever she wanted (short skirts, for example), but that there, they were dealing with different types of sexism and harassment. Whilst in Nairobi, catcalling and street harassment based on what you are wearing is a big problem, as discussed in chapter two.

It was also important to Helena to specify that she was a black or African feminist because then she acknowledges that race and colour determines your position as a woman. She said, *"I hate it when white feminists say 'we're all women, I don't see colour'. There is so much more to it, they don't have to see colour because they are not the ones being double-discriminated against."* Her statement exemplifies exactly what Moore (1988) is arguing in

the quote above, and shows empirically the frustration tied to the perceived domination of white women in feminist discourse. Helena then told me about the concept of colourism, and how it causes interracial discrimination. Light-skinned, black women have more advantages in society and are seen as more attractive than darker women. She added that she is of course aware that they have issues too, but that it is the same as with black and white women, their issues are different. She then pointed at me, and said, like you, for example. Because of your skin colour, you are favoured by men and by society, "*check your light-skin privilege*".

I remember that when Helena's made these statements on colourism, I was a bit puzzled and ashamed. Not because I did not think they were valid, but because I had not thought about it at this level before. In Norway, I am seen as black, but in Kenya, I was the light-skinned privileged girl. After our conversation, I started seeing these commercials for skin-bleach all around me and on social media. I then understood how widespread this actually was and that many black women use toxic chemicals to lighten their skin. Helena's view of African feminism, and stating that they are still fighting for the basics, is a way of distancing herself, from a white, 'Western' kind of feminism, very similar to what Mohanty (2003) and hooks (2000) are referring to in their respective books on feminism among people of colour. Furthermore, her emphasis on colourism also brings interracial racism into the discourse, which is arguably a product of colonialism, where the colonizers favoured Africans with lighter skin tones.

Two of my informants, Zola and Louise were studying in The States, but back on holiday when I met them in Nairobi. Louise told me that it was an adjustment moving to America, and all of a sudden have to deal with race. She found it strange that people were giving her identities. That they saw her as black before African, whilst at home, she was primarily Kenyan, and then African. She found it hard to navigate her sense of self, and to make the claim that she was both. Louise said that her experiences in The States had made her more aware of race, and that having conversations of race, has taught her how to have conversations about gender. "*That has been a big thing for me this year, intersectionality, and how to navigate between two types of oppression.*" When I asked Louise about black or African feminism, she said that she had been negotiating the concepts for a while, but she had concluded that it depended on context. In the States, she was a black feminist, in Kenya she was an African feminist, but primarily she is just a "*feminist, period. Then if someone comes at me with that 'feminism is Western'-stuff, I elaborate on that, and on African feminism.*"

This last statement shows how Louise is altering her feminist enactments and expressions in different spaces. In America, the discourse is not about feminism being ‘Western’ or not, or having to defend what feminism is. Whilst in Kenya, she might have to start from the ‘basics’, as Helena put it, and explain why it is relevant in an African context at all. What is still similar in both situations is race. I would argue that, in both instances, it boils down to race, but the enactment of race differs in the two spaces.

Both Helena and Louise’s statements shows the struggle of positioning oneself in feminism, and that it is always contextual; depending on the situation they find themselves in. Personal feminism is fluid, and constantly changing, as with Zola, mentioned in the previous chapter, who no longer wanted to identify as a feminist, because she felt that not even intersectional feminism could account for all the damage the patriarchy has done, and all the different types of women out there. Furthermore, Helena and Louise express how important intersectionality has been for them in developing their feminisms, and also showing how important intersectionality is for the feminist movement in general. It is empirically showing the importance of focusing on how race and racism divides gender identity (Moore 1988: 11), and how women of colour distance themselves from what they see as a movement dominated by ‘white, Western women’ (hooks 2000).

## The importance of social media and role models

In the theory and methodology chapter, and in the beginning of this one, I argued that social media and the internet in general, played a big part in my informant’s lives, and in their access to feminist inspiration. Furthermore, this is how many of them came to know of black or African feminist role models and how they realised that feminism could account for their struggles and visions as well.

My informants, and especially those within the creative scene, use Instagram to connect with other feminists in Nairobi, and share insights or problems, or to invite to different events and gatherings of feminist interest. Jamila and Ashita are especially vocal through social media, and it is interesting to follow them on Instagram, post fieldwork, and see what they are sharing. Fotopoulou argues that we are moving into an era of ‘*digital sisterhood*’, how feminist activist identity is being made through digital media, and that doing feminist politics

involves enacting oneself as embodied political subjects (2016: 37, 61, 123). Social media is a very effective way to reach out to other women, and spread knowledge. Not only across countries and continents, but also within communities.

### “#MenAreTrash”

During fieldwork, there was a hashtag circulating, called “#menaretrash”. My informants told me that this hashtag originated in South Africa, because of an incidence where a man killed, burned and buried his girlfriend. The hashtag’s purpose was to shed light on, and call out, sexual harassment, rape and violence against women. My informants shared their own and other’s experiences on Facebook and Instagram, and added the hashtag. Not surprisingly, the hashtag was faced with quite a lot of resistance and offence, predominantly from men, who answered with the hashtag “#NotAllMen”, because they felt that the former hashtag made every man a villain. I remember that my informants, especially Jamila and Ashita, could not possibly understand how the men that got offended, did not understand that the point of the hashtag was not to say that *all* men are trash, but to call attention to an issue, and urge for change. In May, Jamila posted this on her Facebook:

*Listen to the women that’s all. Really listen. ‘Just because you don’t do it, or you don’t see it being done, doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen,’ she said. ‘When men go, ‘not all men’, they make it about ‘I’ve never seen it, I’ve never done it... so it can’t be true.’ #menaretrash.*

The hashtag shows how African women in general, and my informants in Nairobi in particular, linked together to form some sort of ‘digital sisterhood’, across countries. This had not been possible if not for social media. The hashtag also naturally transcended from a discussion online, to everyday conversations in real life. It sparked the conversation about women’s rights, and sexism when we were hanging out, and it made my informants more aware of what was happening around them. Bonila and Rosa (2015) write about #Ferguson, in the aftermaths of the killing of African American, Michael Brown and how hashtags work towards creating potential change and real life social movements. They argue that ‘hashtag-activism’ is a way for people who normally do not have a voice or ability to reach out, to get their message across, and thereby forcing society to take action (Bonila and Rosa 2015: 8). The same can be argued with regards to #menaretrash, where the subordinate part of the

population (women) have the opportunity to speak up, and are encouraging other women to do the same.

As is obvious, “#menaretrash”, shares a striking resemblance to the hashtag “#MeToo” that spread worldwide just around six months later. I was back from fieldwork when this began, but kept following my informants on social media to see what they posted. They were very much part of the movement, but considering they already had been engaged with the “#menaretrash” movement; many of their experiences had already been shared. What is interesting is that some of the men in the creative scene posted a supportive hashtag, “#howcanichange”, to encourage men in their social circles to call out bad and sexist behaviour. Both of these hashtags are examples of Fotopoulou’s (2016) argument on ‘digital sisterhood’, and how it connects feminists across countries and continents as a result of globalization. Digital sisterhood does not necessarily have to be established just based on hashtags; the same argument can be applied to role models as well, as was the case with Adichie.

### Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as an African role model

Adichie is a Nigerian fiction author and feminist activist, who has been an important role model in terms of intersectional feminism. I read one of her novels “Americanah”, and her ted-talk made into a booklet, called “We Should All Be Feminists” for non-academic inspiration on feminism in Africa, before arriving in Nairobi. I had predicted that most of my informants would know of her, but I found that she was not only well known and read, but also the reason why many of my informants realised that they were feminists. Helena told me that she had been engaged with questions of equity and women’s rights since she was young, but she never had a word for it. Then, during her time in university, “*a friend told me that this woman, Chimamanda-something, was coming to Nairobi to speak, and I went, and that was it. I was a feminist.*” Hearing Adichie speak and reading her work had had such a big impact on Helena, and I could see her face light up every time she spoke of her.

Louise told me a similar story of how she found a word for it through Adichie. She said she had been passionate about gender issues since high school, but after hearing of, and reading Adichie’s work, she knew that she was a feminist too. Adichie’s work and activism has contributed to the idea that it is possible for feminist to be black or African, but she has also normalized feminism, and broken down negative stereotypes about what it means to be one.

Her book, “We should all be feminists” is neither controversial nor particularly theoretical, but rather a compilation of experiences and stories from her own life, that have made her reflect on the need for feminism. Below is an excerpt from her booklet:

*(...) since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a Happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. (...). Of course much of this was tongue-in-cheek, but what it shows is how that word feminist is so heavy with baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge (...)* (Adichie 2014: 10-11).

The excerpt from Adichie’s book sums up many of the aspects that have been discussed in this, and the previous, chapter, and her humorous light way of writing about feminism in a relatable way, arguably unarms the concept and makes it more accessible.

## Performing feminisms

As a form of continuation of what was discussed in chapter three on contextual identities, it seems interesting to focus further on Goffman’s (1959) theory on social interaction as a performance, but from another perspective. What if front-stage or the individual’s performance, is not where they have to downplay their feminist identity, but quite the opposite; that the feminism is a performance in itself. It is worth mentioning that this does not mean that the feminist performing is not genuine in her beliefs, but perhaps, that the most central thing is showing it off and talking about it, rather than other forms of action. This is arguably tied to class and consumption, where a woman’s performance of feminism might give her higher status and ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]) within the group. Butler’s argument on the performance of gender is also relevant. She states, “(...) *the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.*” (1988: 521). My informants’ performance of feminism is arguably part of this performance of gender.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the feminists in the creative scene, were very open about their feminist identity, and wanted everyone around them to know. They also

expressed it through their dressing (clothes that most people outside of the group might deem inappropriate), pictures and quotes on social media, or in their art or poetry. I especially heard quite a few very strong and funny poems about feminism. I had a feeling that for many of the women, the flaunting of their feminism was a big part of it. I had a very interesting talk with Zola about this:

*There is a level of feminism and a higher awareness within the creative scene, because there are also people who are highly globalized and cosmopolitan. In this day and age, feminism is a component of modernism, but it's also been commodified, and the substance of feminism is reduced to an aesthetic. So in these spaces, you have people who are open to discourse and the performance of feminism, but in other spaces you'll see people taking feminism into action.*

So according to Zola, the feminism expressed and displayed among these women, is of a performative character and based on her argument that the substance of feminism has been reduced to an aesthetic, one could argue that performative feminism can be seen as a form of consumption. In chapter one, I discussed how the middle class in Nairobi, and the creative scene in particular, are distinguishing themselves from others, through consumption (Bourdieu 1986, Liechty 2003), and I would argue that feminism can be seen as one of these forms of distinction. Many of the feminists in the creative scene are passionate about putting into words the ways in which the patriarchal systems surrounding them are suppressing women, then whether or not these words then transcend into something else, naturally varies depending on the individual. Zola continued, saying that the way that this performance is manifesting itself in these spaces is still of importance, it is not just 'pretend'. They are sparking discussions and manifesting their feminism in their creative work, where they are creating feminist content, and using social platforms to, for example, reclaim their bodies. Louise mentioned something along these lines, and she seemed to share some of Zola's views of performative feminism. She said:

*This is maybe sort of a critique of the creatives - that it tends to be about 'I want to dress the way I want, sleep with whomever I want, don't want to shave, etcetera', but what does that mean for a woman in Masaai land? We need to have so many more conversations before we get there. Sometimes I feel so defensive about feminism. (...) I want it to be about action, not just saying you are one.*

In this instance, it might be relevant to separate between personal feminist identity and feminism as a movement. Being able to be autonomous and take back control over your own body, is important, but as Louise is pointing out; for a majority of Kenyan women the question of shaving or not shaving your armpits is non-existent in their minds (most women do not shave their armpits or legs at all). hooks criticizes the way in which many women view feminism as a lifestyle and how *“these women do not see that it undermines the feminist movement to project the assumption that “feminist” is but another pre-packaged role women can now select as they search for identity.”* (2000: 29). Furthermore, hooks argues that to be able to do so, is a sign of privilege and has no larger effect on feminism as a political movement.

Thus, this discourse is a difficult one, because on the one hand, practical action is crucial when it comes to fighting for women’s rights, I do not think anyone would disagree with that. But on the other hand, the fight for women empowerment, and the implementation of regulations and laws that empower women, has been a focus in Kenya for some years now, so something is happening in terms of action. What actually might be lacking is that individual awareness and mind-set among women. This does not necessarily have to be feminism, but more broadly, that you are acknowledging the inequality among the sexes. In other words, when these women are performing their feminism, showing it off and talking about it, it might make other women and men aware of it, and start thinking about their own position within a patriarchal society. More importantly, when these women within the creative network are also popular and ‘powerful’ (in their own way), with voices that are actually being heard, is that not in many ways just as important as other forms of action? I would argue that the performative feminists in the creative scene are acting as role models, like Adichie or others, using social media and different events as platforms to spread feminist content, and showing how it can manifest itself in a, of not Kenyan, then at least a Nairobi context.

### A certain way of talking about it

Related to the idea of performance, and Bourdieu (1986) and Liechty’s (2003) theories on distinction and consumption, is the way my informants talk about feminism and topics surrounding the concept. Liechty states the following on the making of middle class identities, *“Performance perspectives helps shed light on how people actively produce class culture, in*

*ways that with surprising regularity, (...) have increasingly dramaturgical (and increasingly mass-mediated) overtones.*" (2003: 25). The reader might have noticed how many of the informants' statements presented in this chapter, are eloquent and nearly academic in their character. It is almost as if their quotes are doing the analysis all on their own, or that they come straight out of a book on feminist theory. They have acquired a certain language for talking about feminism, which might function as a way of distancing themselves from the rest of society, from the non-feminists. Furthermore, it might also be a linguistic tactic, to make feminism seem more appealing. For someone who starts out from a sceptical point of view towards an unfamiliar and controversial concept, they might be more inclined to identify with it if the arguments are presented in an eloquent way.

To be clear, I am not implying that informants like Zola, Louise, Helena and Jamila are not also articulate in other areas of their lives, they most certainly are, but I noticed a shift between when they were talking specifically about feminism, and when they were merely in their daily practices. We could be at a party, or sitting in a restaurant with several other people, talking about trivial things, but the second the topic of feminism came up, the linguistic tone changed. They went into this role, in Goffman's (1959) terms, with well-formulated sentences, almost as if they were following a script.

Another aspect tied to this feminist rhetoric, is how information flows freely as a result of globalization. Many feminists, regardless of where in the world they are situated, follow the same people on Instagram or Facebook, and read the same feminist blogs, books or theories. If they are gaining inspiration from the same place, it is not surprising that they are talking about the same things, and adopting a certain rhetoric. Thus, feminism as an 'activist package' (Tsing 2005: 227) that travels might change praxis and content, but keep the packaging. Sometimes, it might just be adopted and implemented by a wide range of women, who lead different lives, but the package is still applicable to them. In other words, even though there is no universal definition of the concept of feminism, there might still be room for a movement of some shared opinions and viewpoints. I would argue that many of the statements posed above by my informants could be valid at a scale beyond the national one. Like for instance, the negotiations concerning feminist identity, and the fact that it changes based on the context you find yourself in, and the people you surround yourself with. Furthermore, the focus on intersectionality, and accounting for factors beyond just being female, how race and class plays into your role as a woman; all of these discourses could be

applicable in many other countries, as they already have. This does not mean, however, that they are to be assumed or taken for granted, because even though they might seem the same, they have to be studied in that specific context they are developing in.

## A correlation between feminism and class?

Class could arguably affect your relation to feminism in at least two ways, which are separate, but still interconnected. The first one is how class determines your opportunity to access feminist ideas, meaning your access to books, the internet, and social media, to name a few. The second way the class you are part of can affect how you view feminism is what type of people you hang out with, work with or in general surround yourself with. The latter one has to do with class to a certain point, but not entirely. Because, as we saw in the previous chapter, women who do not identify with feminism, like Eve or Joy are part of the same class, in terms of economy and education, as the feminists presented in this current one, but they still do not want to call themselves feminists. My argument, which has been made previously in this chapter, but is worth discussing again; is that it is easier to identify with a concept, if you see women around you, that you know, and possibly look up to, express and enact feminism, you might realise that all the negative connotations you previously associated with the word, does not apply to all feminists. Louise, Zola, Jamila and Helena were all associated with the creative scene, although to different degrees. Zola and Jamila were very much part of the inner circle of the scene, while Helena and Louise were passionate about creative things and probably wanted to get access into this inner circle, so they attended events that happened at The Alchemist or other venues. By being surrounded by all these women who identified with feminism and performed it openly, both on social media and in real life, I would argue that they are more likely to start identifying with feminism themselves.

Following this argument, the creative scene, might then be a class within a class, where economic capital is at the base, because you have to be part of a certain class to get access to these spaces in the first place, but social capital (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]) determines your acceptance in to the group. Zola said this on the topic, *“Social capital is so prevalent now in the creative scene, and I have been thinking about how it can mitigate for inequality, because it can protect you from a certain degree of patriarchy and classism.”* In other words, by being ‘cool’, and creating new, controversial content, you achieve a higher status, which can in turn,

protect you from sexism. Furthermore, performing feminisms has become a way of gaining this social capital. I noticed this at the events I attended with the creative scene. I remember Ashita hosted a poetry night, where she performed one poem about feminism, and one about sexism, then suddenly, more women started performing poems about the topic, and they developed and became more and more political, and poignant. One of these poems, concerning sexuality, will be presented in the next chapter.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed how my informants express and enact feminisms, which are fluid, continually changing, developing and being negotiated. Furthermore, I have outlined how this development often takes place: through the internet, social media, books or role models, and how feminism as an ‘activist package’ is negotiated in the context of Nairobi. The activist package of feminism among my informants in Nairobi, is based largely upon the importance of intersectionality, and the development of an African or black feminism. In addition, I have argued that the creative scene is one of the biggest contributors to a spread of feminist information and inspiration, and how some women within it, through what I have labelled performative feminism, normalize the concept, and give an example how it can manifest itself in Nairobi. This performative feminism is connected to consumption and class, whereas identification and performance of the concept might gain social capital.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how my feminist informants use their sexuality to express their autonomy and take back control over their bodies, how their feminist identities have affected their relation to men and dating, and also how my male informants viewed feminism, and the pressure they face based on masculinity ideals and patriarchal structures.

# Chapter five: Sexualities and masculinities

This final chapter is concerned with young women's view of men in their lives, but also with young men's view of themselves and of women. These two parts presented are separate, but are still related to one another. In the first section, I will discuss my informants' relationship preferences, and how their feminist identities have shaped their view of men and what they want from a relationship. Moreover, it is concerned with how young women's expression of their sexuality can be seen as a feminist statement and a way of liberating oneself. The second part of this chapter is concerned with a discussion surrounding different masculinities. Firstly, I will show how some men feel the need to assert their dominance over women, and how they feel neglected as a result of women's empowerment. I will then discuss how young men within the creative scene are trying to reconfigure their masculine identities, and support and urge their male friends to let go of misogynistic masculinity ideals and bad behaviour towards women. I will show how they, inspired by their female feminist friends (or lovers), are developing new ways of being 'masculine' or a man.

## Dating

As mentioned in previous chapters, casual dating was a big part of my informants' lives, as it is for most young people. Most of them were nowhere near ready to get married and were resisting the pressure placed on them by society and their families. Regardless, they had an active dating life, and were often sexually active with several men at the same time. They also frequently talked about how they were annoyed with men, who were not faithful or treating them right, as discussed in the previous chapter.

### A feminist's relationship preferences

*Has anyone [of the feminists] talked to you about dating someone who is not from their race? Because I have had this discussion with my girlfriends, that men from "the western world" are more used to feminism and the concept. My most successful relationship was with an American, because we did not have the power struggles. I do not know how to say this, because I am all about 'black love', but it is just easier.*

This quote is from the informal interview I had with Alyssa, whom I introduced in the second chapter. She is not part of the creative scene, but after she brought this point to my attention, I began noticing a pattern among my feminist informants within the network. Alyssa states that her most successful relationship was with an American, and the reason was that they did not have power struggles. By this, she was referring to her previous relationships with her fiancée, mentioned in chapter two, who wanted her to delay her master degree. She also told me about how this same man wanted her to stop working when they got married because “*someone had to do the laundry and cook.*” On the other hand, with men who were not from an African country, she did not have to defend her identity, and the fact that her main job was not to be a homemaker. She had been talking to her friends about this, and said that when they talk about what they want in a relationship there are certain boxes that needs to be ticked, and her experience was that European or American men more often filled these requirements.

Several of my informants seemed to prefer to date foreigners; they did not necessarily have to be white, but just not from an African country. They felt that African men could not keep up with women empowerment or feminism, and that many of them were disrespectful towards women. Kate, as mentioned in the methodology section, always had a new lover by her side each time I met her, and she never spoke of dating African men. It was either foreigners or women, like Ashita, whom she was dating when I met her. Ashita, who is of Punjab descent, told me that brown men were the worst, and then black men, followed by white at the top. She said that she did not have problems with dating African men, but preferred to stay away from Indians, for instance. Her ranking was based on how the men treat women and what they expect from a girlfriend or wife. In other words, she too preferred to date outside of her own race, but felt that African men have a little more respect for women than an Indian man did. Another informant, Lisa, was similar to Kate in the sense that she had numerous fleeting relationships with expatriates, and no urge to settle down any time soon, or at all for that matter. She wanted to be free and sleep with whomever she wanted, but I never saw her with a Kenyan man, they were always foreigners staying in Nairobi for job related reasons.

One time Ashita and I were having lunch she told me an interesting thing about dating within the creative scene. She said that they were all friends, and had so much love for each other, but that no one dated one another: “*The guys prefer to date white or mixed girls, like you, and the girls only date white men.*” In practice it was not as clear-cut as Ashita stated, and I knew many women who had Kenyan boyfriends, and vice versa, but there is definitely a point to be

made about this. It is important to underline that this does not mean that my feminist informants disliked all black men, they had a lot of love for their male friends and acquaintances, but it seemed that they felt it was easier to be involved with someone who was, as Alyssa put it, more used to feminists.

Helena said the following on the topic of being a feminist and dating, *“People seem to think that feminists are lesbians, and I wish it was that simple, that I could just be into women now. It would make my life easier. What actually happens is that you just date less, because most men are not able to keep up, so you become pickier.”* Helena was probably the one of my informants who was the most tired and annoyed of men. Whenever I met her, she expressed general frustration and anger towards them. This was also part of the reason why she stayed away from dating, because no man could meet her standards.

Her comment about how people think feminists are lesbians brings me to another interesting topic. I remember being surprised about how many of the women I met in the creative scene were openly bisexual. This was something I did not foresee in a country like Kenya, which condemns homosexual activity. Both Ashita, Kate and Zola were sexually attracted to both men and women, and it made me wonder if their feminist identities had something to do with their realization of being attracted to women as well as to men.

I mentioned in chapter three, that Zola moved away from calling herself a feminist partly because she had *“gotten to know the hearts of so many men”*, and realized that they suffer under patriarchy as well. She is indirectly saying that she stopped identifying as a feminist when she moved away from the anger she had against men and realized that she actually could be attracted to the opposite sex. I spent quite a lot of time with Zola and her newfound lover, Thomas, and they were both very passionate about re-establishing the stereotypes often found in a male-female relationship. She told me that she had never felt attracted to a man before Thomas, but that he is something different, softer, and definitely not the typical Kenyan male. They told me that they do not see themselves as genders, just as humans. Their relationship and love for each other is like nothing else I have ever seen before, and they made everyone around them feel loved as well.

I would argue that the case with Zola and Thomas and their relationship was what many of my other informants were longing for. Others in the creative scene viewed them as the perfect couple, defined by mutual respect and none of the power struggles. Zola’s comment that

Thomas was not like other Kenyan men, exemplifies how these feminists are looking for certain qualities in a man, and not necessarily a man with foreign origin. Thus, their feminist identity is setting the standard for what they want from a man. They cannot see themselves in what they view as a 'traditional' relationship. Their sexuality and attraction to women might stem from the fact that they have realized how difficult it is to find a man that respects and understand them and their feminisms. Moreover, it might also be possible that being a bisexual woman is somewhat trendy. One could argue that whom you love or are sexually attracted to is normally not something you choose, but it might also be possible that these women are more open towards it because of their general urge to try out or implement new things. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the creative scene are lovers of everything controversial and new, so sexuality might be no exception. Regarding the trend part, it is on a global scale becoming more and more common to be 'pansexual', which entails falling in love with whom the person is on the inside, not the sex, like Zola and Thomas' relationship.

### Expressing female sexuality

Connected to some of my informants being open about their attraction to both sexes, is the expression of female sexuality, which is a topic that is often suppressed. Women are not supposed to be open about their desires and sexual pleasures, and in doing so they are likely to be labelled promiscuous or even a 'slut'. Spronk states that, "[d]ominant discourses of sex and sexuality in Nairobi emphasize female chastity, female reproductive capacity and modesty in appearance" (2006: 270). Furthermore, Spronk (2006) writes that there is little, if any, research conducted on sexuality in Kenya or Africa that does not concern HIV/AIDS. I have deliberately chosen not to mention HIV/AIDS precisely for that reason; my opinion is that there is extensive material on this subject already, but not enough on different views of sexuality and sexual pleasure.

I noticed a distinct variation between how my non-feminist informants and the feminists in the creative scene talked about sex and their sexual relationships with men. Joy, for instance, whom I knew had a boyfriend and was sexually active, never talked explicitly about it. One time we were in a friend's apartment, getting ready to go to a party, she undressed to change, and was standing in front of me completely naked. Joy first asked me, "*Are you uncomfortable with being naked in front of your female friends?*" and I answered that, no, that was no issue for me. She then continued, asking, "*What about if you're with your*

*boyfriend, are you naked in front of him?"* I nodded, and asked her back, if she was not naked with her boyfriend? Joy answered, laughingly, *"I would never do that!"* Joy, whom is sexually active, has never been naked in front of her boyfriend, and found it shocking that I would ever do such a thing. On the other hand, if she was naked with her friends it was no issue at all. Moreover, it did not seem natural for her to talk about her sexual experiences.

Zola, on the other hand, was open about her sexuality and what she wanted from a relationship. We could sit in her living room, with Thomas, talking about their sexual experiences together, without the two of them being embarrassed. Kate and Jamila would also often speak freely about sexual pleasure and how so many men did not know how to please a woman properly. I also heard a spoken word performance once, by Nailah, who is twenty-one and also part of the creative scene, which was very candid,

*I was chilling with this guy right, and I said we're not having sex cause I was still trying to feel him out and in that moment I thought he would say, "cool, though can I at least eat you out?" but instead, this fool said, "since we're not fucking, can you at least give me head?" and I fell for that trap one too many times, sucked dick one too many times for boys who clearly thought their orgasms meant more than mine. 3 hours in traffic just to see this dude, but why did I even go if he didn't make me cum? So that got me thinking, about how my clit is always ignored like it wasn't the Almighty God who designed it. What if we stopped sexualizing things like boobs and started sexualizing the clit, would you boys be able to find it? See, this is serious so don't take it loosely but I'm about to give you a one on one class on how to eat my pussy.*

This is only half of the spoken word performance, which I asked her to send to me later that night. When she performed this piece, most of the people in the audience cheered, men included, but a couple of men next to me said afterwards that they felt it was a bit too literal and they seemed a little offended. Nailah's performance directly addressed an issue that I heard several of my feminist informants complain about; the fact that men are not able to please them properly and think that a sexual encounter is a one-way street, meant to please the man only. Furthermore, her performance and the young men's reactions exemplifies how female sexuality is something that should not be a topic and that it is inappropriate for a woman to be talking about such things.

In Spronk's (2006) research on young women's view of sexuality in Nairobi, her informants express quite a different view on their own sexuality and relationships with men. She writes that the young women *"on the one hand, (...) perceived becoming sexually active as part of becoming a woman while, on the other hand, they were apprehensive about it because of the belief that proper women should abstain from sex until marriage"* (Spronk 2006: 271). Spronk also classifies her informants as part of the middle class, but her findings do not coincide with mine. I never heard any of my informants, within or outside of the creative scene talk about the importance of not having sex until marriage. They were all, as far as I know, sexually active. Spronk's research took place almost two decades before my own, which might explain the difference in our findings.

I would argue that when the feminists within the creative scene, as opposed to the non-feminists outside of it, are speaking openly about their sexuality and expressing it, it is way of liberating themselves. A feminist act, and demand for equality both in bed and in life in general; they are taking their bodies back as a statement. They were not only doing this through the act of words, but also in the way that they dressed and the content they shared on social media. As I mentioned in the first chapter, clubs and bars in general and The Alchemist in particular worked as a free-space for women, where they could be themselves without being harassed. This was where they could wear whatever they wanted, not matter how controversial or revealing, and it was both praised and appreciated by others in the group.

Amina told me that dressing in a controversial style did not come without a cost and that even though it was highly accepted within the creative scene, she often got weird looks and comments when she walked the streets of Nairobi. Once again, this affirms the argument made in chapter four about the creative scene being a class within a class, where social capital (Bourdieu 2011 [1986]) rules, but as soon as you step out of the spaces of the creative scene, their 'creative controversy' is not understood or supported. Furthermore, it connects to the discussion in the previous chapters about contextual identities and how my informants continually had to alternate certain aspects of their personality depending on the situation.

## Masculinities and feminism

*The tendency to ignore imbalances in order to permit a grasp of women's lives has led too many scholars to forget that men and women ultimately live together in the world and, so, that we will never understand the lives that women lead without relating them to men. (Rosaldo 1980: 396).*

As I have mentioned earlier, I spent quite a lot of time with men during my fieldwork, both because I shared an apartment with two men, Marcus and Andy, during the majority of my stay, but also because they were the ones that were easiest to connect with. They were my gatekeepers and opened doors for me (both metaphorically and literally) in terms of access. I gained many interesting insights from talking to men about women empowerment and feminism, as they never concealed their opinion and many were interested in hearing my insights on the topic. As Rosaldo (1980) writes, it is crucial to understand men's point of view and their position in the patriarchy, to fully understand women's subordination. Connell coined the term 'Hegemonic Masculinity' and defines it as "*(...) the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*" (1995: 77). The hegemonic masculinity then functions as an ideal of what a man is supposed to be, and is at the top of the hierarchy of masculinities. Furthermore, Connell emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and on race and class in the study of masculinity (1995).

Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morell (2005) write about African masculinities and argue for the importance of complexity in the study of men; i.e. one has to keep in mind that not all men are the same. Inspired both by intersectional feminism and Connell's (1995) work on 'hegemonic masculinities', they wish to shed light on the different forms of masculinity that exist in the continent, but also similarities between them. Furthermore, the authors argue for the importance of seeing African masculinities in light of colonial domination and because of it, the emasculation of men on the continent (Ouzgane and Morell 2005: 4-8).

As my own personal definition of feminism presented in chapter one argues; it is the patriarchal society in general and not men in particular that are standing in the way of equity between the sexes. I noticed how many of my male informants were struggling to live up to the ideals presented by society of what a Kenyan or African man was supposed to be. More

importantly, I saw how men within the creative scene in particular were working to reconfigure these ideas, and to encourage feminist mind-sets and behaviours among their male friends. This will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

### Asserting masculinity

Even though I encountered a great number of men who supported women's empowerment during the course of my fieldwork, I also met, as has previously been made clear; many men who wanted to assert their dominance over women. I was at a party one night, with Joy and her friends, right outside the campus of the international university they attended. As mentioned in chapter three, Joy and many of her friends, are not very passionate about women empowerment, and feel feminism is about competing with men. We were sitting in the living room having drinks, and one of the young men at the party asked me what I was doing in Nairobi. I told him that I was, among other things, researching how feminism is expressed and understood in Nairobi and I already knew that this was a sure way to trigger a discussion.

After I had explained the research to him, he responded in the following way: *"I'm all for women having a chance and equality and stuff, but I don't believe women should be individuals. You know, even in the word female, there's male. You will have no woman without a man."* I remember that his statement surprised me. Not because I had not heard someone say this before, I most certainly had, but because of his presumable class status, and the fact that he attended this liberal, international university, I was surprised that he had these opinions. Either way, I tried to contain myself and observe how the rest of the room reacted, but there was not a single person in the room that argued against him. Another young man followed up on the first statement, agreeing with his friend: *"Women should have rights and all that, but they should not be in leadership positions, they are too emotional."* One of the girls at the party, whom I did not know, finally jumped into the discussion, and was clearly frustrated at this point. She said, *"Why don't men believe in women? You probably had one female boss who might have been too emotional, but you can't say that all women are bad leaders. Me, I'm not a feminist - that is too much, but I fight for women!"* She was the only one to speak up against the two young men, my informant Joy was on the other side of the room, clearly amused by our discussion, but did not seem to care about the statements that had been made about women's position in society.

The opinions expressed by the two young men at the party, provide an example of how some men view feminism and women empowerment and how they might feel threatened by powerful women. The first man's statement was partly contradicting; he says that he believes that women should have a chance, but that they should not be individuals. To build upon his argument, he practically said that women cannot exist on their own - they need a man to be complete human beings. What is interesting, is that even though their statements seem quite misogynistic, neither one of the men's personalities seemed to correlate with what came out of their mouths.

In Rob Pattman's (2005) article based on research among male, African students at a university in Botswana, he argues that they assert their masculinities and differentiate themselves from other men, based on their view of women. He writes, "*The men were constructing their identities as men partly in relation to the ways they understood, categorized, and evaluated women.*" (Pattman 2005: 233). Furthermore, he discusses how his male informants felt the pressure to fit into this ideal of the 'hegemonic male' (Connell 1995), and thereby not standing up for themselves or women in front of their male friends in fear of how they would react (Pattman 2005: 225, 233). Thus, some of the young men at Joy's party might not fully believe in, or agree with what was being said about women's subordinate position, but they were afraid to disagree and to be viewed as not 'masculine' enough. Furthermore, there might be a reluctance towards being a 'modern' man, as Pattman (2005) argues, because of the association with modernity as being something 'western'. They are thereby holding onto some of the values they believe to be 'traditional', as discussed in regards to some of the informants presented in chapter three.

After the discussion, I went out on the balcony with a friend named Christian. He was the kind of young man whom always spoke calmly and with conviction. Christian told me that I had to remember where these young men were coming from and how they have been brought up to think and act. He then said, as many have said before him, "*You know, Ida, when you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.*" This quote can contribute to an explanation of why many men feel threatened by women's empowerment and feminism. The fact that many women all of a sudden have become more empowered leave many men feeling vulnerable and that again might make them defensive.

## “The boy child is neglected”

*“Men seem to think women empowerment is done, we’re finished; the girl is empowered. So now they ask, ‘What about the boy?’” (Esther)*

One of the phrases I heard most often in the field was, *“The boy child is neglected”*. This was often expressed as a response when telling men about my research and it was a way of explaining to me that there was no need to conduct any more research on women or feminism, because, as Esther’s quote says, they are already empowered. One afternoon, I went with Marcus to visit one of his friends, who was in town and staying in one of the new, classy hotels in one of the suburbs of Nairobi. We were sitting in the hotel lobby with Marcus’s colleague, Pete and started talking about feminism and gender equity. Pete then said, *“You know that now, the boy child is neglected, because everyone is all about empowering women, no one cares about the boys”*. I asked him why he felt neglected, and he told me that there are so many opportunities for women right now and that makes it harder for men to succeed. He was referring to some of the factors discussed in chapter two, for instance, the affirmative action for women in politics. As Christian’s quote indicated above; some men feel threatened by women’s empowerment. This could arguably be tied to the discussions in chapter three, concerning the stigma attached to the concept of feminism, and the idea that women want to fight and compete with men, that they are somehow trying to steal their positions of power.

I was curious to know where this exact statement came from, and how so many men said the exact same phrase. I suspected that it had to derive from some article in a national newspaper or something similar. I asked Isaac, my closest friend and gatekeeper within the creative scene, about this the first time we met. I remember that he rolled his eyes when he heard the statement and responded,

*The boy child is not neglected, the boy child is bored. He doesn’t care and he just wants to look at girls and drink all day. The only reason why people talk about this all of a sudden is because of a national exam at secondary school level, where the girls did much better than the boys.*

Thus, the phrase derived from the result of an exam, and then somehow extended to become the status quo of society in general. In Isaac’s comment about the boy child being ‘bored’, he seems to be implying that young men are lazy and do not care about what is happening in society and continued on to say, *“Kenyan men are so passive, they don’t care about anything*

*other than themselves. If they see a guy beating up a girl, they won't do anything, "it doesn't concern me".*" As we will see below, Isaac and other men in the creative scene were not at all passive, quite the contrary; they were expanding and reconfiguring their masculine identities.

### Reconfiguring masculinities

I was at an art exhibition one night in early June where the title was "Young Guns", and the topics were masculinity and young men's role in society. I was there with Andrea, a friend, who is Zane's girlfriend. After we had walked through the gallery, we went outside for drinks, and Andrea met an old friend of hers, Shaka, who is a painter. Shaka looked like a real hippie, with an orange hat, and long dreads. She introduced us, we started talking about feminism and masculinities, and Shaka said, *"No one is happy in the world, except from the white man. Cause the black man is still struggling. Feminism is about men, really, like history is about the white man. So when I say that 'I am a man', that is about me realizing my privilege."* Shaka meant that there was a hierarchy of men in the world, and that black men were at the bottom, whereas the white man is the 'hegemonic' (Connell 1995) male, at the top of the list. Connell argues that black and white men's masculinities are constructed in relation to each other, and in this relationship, black men fear white men's terrorism, a fear that is founded in the history of colonialism and in post-colonial situations (1995: 75).

I would argue that, Shaka's argument that feminism is about men, saying that he is realizing his male privilege, is about him realizing that men need to change for feminism to achieve its goals. That they have a responsibility to change their mind-sets and their view of women. This is exactly what I observed among the young men in the creative scene. They were working actively to break harmful masculinity patterns. Butler writes, *"Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all."* (Butler: 1988: 522). Her argument concerning gender as a performance is interesting in relation to how my male informants were reconfiguring their identities.

Isaac is an example of reconfiguration of masculinity ideals. He was, as I mentioned in the introduction of my key informants, one of the most known figures in the creative scene, and he was redefining what it meant to be a heterosexual African man. I am purposely adding

heterosexual because many people thought he was gay based on his appearance and personality. He was for instance, always very open about his feelings and thoughts, never suppressing his emotions. Which is not at all a typical thing for a Kenyan man to do. He is also very passionate about fashion and part of his work entails styling for photoshoots or theatre. Isaac always wore at least three rings on each hand, and a number of bracelets on his arms To sum up: he cared deeply about his appearances. Outside of the spaces the creative scene operated in, many people would yell mean things at him, or imply that he was homosexual, but among other creatives, he was a style icon. Isaac is very good looking, athletic and arguably a 'hegemonic' (Connell 1995) male within the creative scene, but he is not influencing negative masculinity ideals. Instead, he might be doing quite the opposite. I would argue, that he is, similar to the female creative feminists, acting as a role model, thereby widening the category of 'man'. Furthermore, Isaac is openly calling himself a feminist and exemplifying to other young Kenyans that men can be feminists too.

Examples of other young men in the creative scene that are reconfiguring masculinities, and encouraging men to do the same, are Zane and Thomas. Zane is an artist, DJ and music producer, who has gained quite a lot of attention for his 'afrobeat electronic' music the past two years. He is, in other words, influential and well known in certain crowds. Zane is, similarly to Isaac, breaking down stereotypes of masculinity, both by being open about his feelings and in the way he dresses. I remember being at The Alchemist with Isaac one night, and Zane approached us wearing a full length green dress from Nigeria that he had borrowed from his mother's closet. None of the people present commented on the fact that he was wearing a dress, apart from complimenting him on a cool garment.

Zola's lover, Thomas, also said that he continually was working to better himself and that spending time with Zola "*teaches him how to love and to let go of the need to be masculine*". They are, as mentioned above, trying to develop new ways of being in a male-female relationship, and Thomas explained how he was really struggling with masculinity ideals before he met Zola. He said he had been surrounded by many male figures in his life that made him suppress the more delicate and emotional parts of himself, but after learning to let go of the need to be a certain type of masculine, he expressed how his life had improved drastically. Both Zane and Thomas also identify as feminists and are thereby contributing to the female creative feminists' mission to normalize and spread the concept of feminism.

## Addressing ‘toxic masculinity’

This spring (February 2018), two rugby players were accused of drugging and raping a young woman, who revealed the incident on her Instagram page, which then sparked an investigation, followed by an ongoing trial (Joseph, Capital News, 09.04.2018). Even though this incident happened post my fieldwork and time spent in Nairobi, the aftermaths and reactions from my informants within the creative scene are highly relevant and related to the reconfiguration of masculinities and the urge for a change. This event sparked a discussion concerning ‘toxic masculinity’, which has become a popular term on social media recently. The psychologists Parent, Gobble and Rochlen define ‘toxic masculinity’ as a subset of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which is *“characterized by a drive to dominate and by endorsement of misogynistic (...) views”* (2018: 2).

Many of the young men in the creative scene, especially Thomas, Zane and Haji, have written long and heartfelt posts on social media concerning ‘toxic masculinity’. About how they, as men, need to encourage each other to be more open about mental health, but also with regards to calling out their male friends if they are treating women badly or expressing misogynistic statements. Haji, a twenty-one-year-old musician and close friend of both Zane and Isaac, wrote the following on his Instagram, *“We, as male musicians, need to use our influence to glorify respect for women in any way we can. We need to speak to our boys directly and deal with these problems of rape and harassment. We need to call each other out, not just through our music, but our conversations as men.”* Haji’s post is only one of many, but it captures the essence. All of my feminist informants were part of this online discussion as well, but the fact that so many men were engaged is powerful, and shows how the female feminists might have inspired their male friends within the network to be part of the movement for change. In addition to this, the young men within the creative scene are just as inspired by global flows as their female counterparts, which also arguably has an effect on their passion to address ‘toxic masculinities’. Furthermore, this digital activism is in many ways a prolonging of both #menaretrash and #howcanichange, which was discussed in the previous chapter.

## Summary

This chapter has dealt with two separate, though interconnected discussions. In the first part of the chapter, I discussed young women's relationships to men, and how my informants' feminist identities shaped their view of dating and what they were looking for in a lover and partner. I then discussed how my informants expressed their sexuality as a feminist statement to liberate themselves and their female bodies. The second part of this chapter was dedicated to the discussion surrounding different masculinities. I have shown how some men feel threatened and neglected by equality, women empowerment and feminism, and discussed reasons for why this might be the case. Moreover, I have argued that many young men within the creative scene have been inspired by their female feminist friends (or lovers) and are now working to reconfigure their masculinities, thereby widening the category 'man' and opening up a space for other forms of masculinity. They are contributing to the development of feminism, and urging their male friends to do the same.

# Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have sought to offer a glimpse into the lives of young middle class women in Nairobi, with emphasis on how these women interpret, negotiate and enact feminism. In doing so, I attempted to show the importance of a feminism that is intersectional and inclusive, and why studying these specific views and developments of feminist identities in countries outside the 'Western world' is significant.

In the first chapter, I presented this thesis' theoretical framework, which included feminist anthropology and feminist theory concerning intersectionality, theories on globalization and how global flows are always filled with friction, and theories on class and consumption. In addition, I outlined the different methods used during fieldwork, and discussed positioning and ethical considerations. In chapter two, the first empirical one, I outlined some of the factors that empower or disempower women in their daily practices, and how society and the state are part of enforcing norms and stereotypes that tell women how to be and act.

Furthermore, I discussed how class determines a woman's life in Nairobi, and how the middle class often distinguishes itself through consumption. This chapter also functioned as a background that allows an understanding of different views and enactments of feminism, and uncovers reasons why some women support it, while others choose to reject the label. Chapter three focused on problematizing feminism in an African or Kenyan context and reasons why the concept might be difficult to identify with. It sought to show the importance of a focus on historical and social contexts when studying feminism and that the reasons for not wanting to be labelled a feminist are often rooted in these two factors. Firstly, feminism as a concept with western origins seen together with Kenya's colonial past, means that some women have issues identifying with something they see as 'Western'. Secondly, identifying as a feminist in the social context of Nairobi, where feminism is not accepted, means that one might face stigma or anger from men and women who do not support feminism, and therefore choose not to label themselves. I have also discussed how feminists problematize their identities and how these are often contextual, based upon which situations they find themselves in. This is highly related to the focus of chapter four, where I looked at how my feminist informants were developing their own forms of feminisms that are highly influenced by a focus on intersectional feminism, and a need to identify with something that can account for locally specific issues and aspirations. I have argued that the creative scene are in large part contributing to the development of feminism in Nairobi, by continually pushing boundaries in

several areas of their lives. In addition, I have discussed how their performance of feminism is a form of distinction and a maker of identity that might seem superficial, but that possibly also functions as a way of normalizing and spreading feminism. Lastly, in chapter five, I discussed how my informants view relationship preferences, sexuality and men, and I have argued that their feminist identity has affected the way they view themselves and what they want from a man. I have also looked at how they express and talk about their sexuality and that this can be seen as an act of liberation. Moreover, the final chapter has focused on men's view of women, of themselves in relation to the opposite sex and of the idea of masculinities. I have shown how a few young men within the creative scene are reconfiguring their masculinities, thereby widening the category of 'the African man'. Thus, in short, my argument is that the young women and men in the creative scene are working together to reconfigure their identities, inspired by feminism, to encourage change in how men and women related to one another, not just within their network, but possibly in Nairobi in general. The young female feminists are playing a huge part in the development of feminism in the context of Nairobi, and as a result, they are contributing to young men's development of their own senses of self as well. Moreover, for future research, it would be interesting to look closer at the negotiation of masculinities in Nairobi, especially within the creative scene.

Even though my number of informants has been limited, having only spent time in a specific context at a particular time and place, I still believe it is possible to conclude that feminism is not an alien concept, if not in Kenya, then at least not in Nairobi. It is, however, a controversial concept, and I would argue that there is much to be learned from studying feminism and the feminist identity as it is negotiated locally in countries outside of the 'Western' world. However, this feminist identity must not be taken for granted as such, not without taking its historical and social context, into account. Furthermore, in this digital era, where trends and ideas are spreading worldwide and new insights and inspiration are just a click away, local feminist identities interplay with global feminist discourses. Thus, I believe that there is great value in conducting further research concerned with global flows and digital media in relation to feminism.

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