



## *FEMINISTS 4 A PEOPLE'S VACCINE PODCAST EP6 Transcript*

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How can feminists from the global south imagine a post-pandemic world?

*With Shree Baphna and Chantal Umuhoza*

**Shree [00:00:04]** Welcome to this episode of The Feminists for A People's Vaccine podcast. My name is Shree Baphna. I am a research associate for DAWN, which is Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era. I am a young feminist just entering into the realm of feminist thought research and advocacy and today I have the pleasure of speaking with Chantal Umuhoza, who is a feminist activist, researcher and founder of Spectra Rwanda.

**Vanita [00:00:41]** Welcome to the Feminists or A People's Vaccine podcast, a space for imagination, discussion and feminist analysis from the Global South. In this creative journey, we approach the tough questions brought to light by the pandemic. Join us to look at this once in a lifetime event as a passageway to imagine a fair and just world for all.

**Shree [00:01:12]** Chantal, it is lovely to be able to speak with you today.

**Chantal [00:01:15]** Thank you so much for having me. My name is Chantal Umuhoza and I'm a feminist activist based in Rwanda. I'm founder of a feminist group called Spectra, which is just a young feminist organisation working on social justice issues from sexual productive justice,

but also economic and ecological justice issues as well. We're also members of FEMNET, which is an African women's rights network that brings together feminist organisations and groups and individuals that walk around feminism, social justice and other human rights issues in general.

**Shree [00:01:52]** So, Chantal, today I want to talk to you a little bit about, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic, but specifically how that's been affecting young women, girls and young people in general, specifically in the African context. So, to start off, we know that, of course, the pandemic has been raging on and off across the world, and the African continent itself is just now only seeing a decline in its third wave. So, specifically, what are some of the challenges young women in Africa face during the pandemic?

**Chantal [00:02:26]** I really wouldn't be able to pick from the continental perspectives, but I want to share some aspects about issues of how the pandemic and the measures that were taken have affected people, specifically young women and girls in Rwanda, but also sharing some of the highlights from what I've been able to gather and learned from the African context. So in general, as we know, there are already pre-existing inequalities that were there in place in terms of gender inequalities, gender pay gaps, all the different enquiries that were already there. So when the pandemic hit, it really exposed all these issues that were already there. Inequalities in Africa were already made worse and have been made worse by a colonial history and current neocolonial imperialism. So, this approach to development that African states have ongoing it is exploitative. It is extractivist in nature. It is a model that does not really seek to solve the inequalities in power and adjust issues of geopolitical power inequalities. But it is about imperialism and capitalism, where the Global North pre-colonial States really put in place models that are about taking what they can out of the continent, instead of supporting the states to really be able to address issues and inequalities that have already been ground and the effects of colonization in general. As an African economy, we depend largely on some funding for the health sector mostly, so we already have a debt crisis, many states and Africa are struggling to pay off debts. And, then, we have sponsored wars and violent conflicts. The pandemic exposed all these issues about who was hit hard. I remember in March 2020, when we were put under total lockdown, schools had to close and all that, so people already started seeing issues around how those increased gender-based violence. There was increased child abuse in homes. Young girls were affected by this because you're staying at home. So it was evident that apparently young girls and children in general are safer in schools, but not in their homes. Then we had loss of jobs. When the pandemic hit and the lockdowns and everything, you know, small businesses of small and medium businesses and from the private sector had to close down. Because there was no work going on they had to shut down and so the majority of people that are employed in this business, usually they are young women, so lost their jobs.

That also really showed how the economy itself has put young women in general in a situation where their survival depends solely on these kinds of businesses and when the pandemic hit and when there is any kind of change in the system, they're the ones that suffer most. Then we have close of public transportation, for example, that affected women and girls in terms of how they could access sexual and reproductive health services. So health facilities were open, but accessibility was an issue. So these also include, for example, how they're not able to have access to contraception, but also HIV treatment and medicines for young women and girls living with HIV, which is also mostly young girls in Rwanda and those mostly coming from marginalized families. So the fact that the government did not foresee or any system did not foresee how this could affect young people in general, and women and girls, was really problematic. But, really, my main point on this is that the already pre-existing situations were just exposed by the pandemic. It's not that the epidemic affected it, it did affect them, but they were already there.

**Shree [00:06:08]** Thank you, Chantal, that was, I mean, you touched on a range of issues and you also brought in the really important aspect of intersectionality where, you know, it's not just a homogenous group. Each individual has their own identity and their own experience that, of course, you know, inform the kind of access they have to resources. And, of course, governments all around the world had a sheer lack of foresight when it comes to anticipating the exacerbation of these inequalities, as you just mentioned. And I want to ask a more specific question, which is basically about access to medicines. As we all know that the African continent and the Global South as a whole, for that matter, is facing a shortage of COVID-19 vaccines and is battling barriers of access to medicine as a whole. Would you be able to share your insights on the situation and how does this affect the ability of disadvantaged groups, young women and girls when it comes to access to vaccines?

**Chantal [00:07:06]** Access to vaccines, really, is something that I knew that was going to happen in terms of unequal access because not just in a vaccine, but anything in general in terms of technology, in terms of medicines and treatment in general. In Africa, for example, it has always been really problematic because of also geopolitical power dynamics and issues between States and the ability of these countries to be able to afford or to actually put on ground capacities for themselves to build and walk on their own medicines and all that. So, issues around intellectual property rights and all that, that really has been an ongoing competition even amongst feminist groups for a long time. When we finally add the vaccines for COVID-19, we knew that was also going to be a struggle. So, in March, like in 2021, I think that's when we started having this conversation about access to vaccines and medicine. So I already had talked about the unequal economic capabilities of countries and how already issues around condition of funding, the debt crises, you know, the economic exploitation

that are going on. That puts Global South countries and African countries specifically in a vulnerable position or in a low position web, the bargaining power, but also the capabilities of them being able to also take a stand and produce the only medicine or anything else has been an issue. We saw the hypocrisy, for example, the European Union states, but you know, some of them that call themselves feminists or decided to have a feminist foreign policy. But they did not support equal access and the like, for example, the removal of intellectual property rights on vaccines and not also willing to support the Global South to build their own facilities and capacities to make their own. So, it was capitalism as usual, you know, just leaving the North/West and supported and funded corporations to say they're the ones that are going to determine what price the vaccines can be. We still have prices for vaccines that are different depending on where. In Global North countries, the price was not the same as third world countries that were able to do that. So in countries they can run, but it's in Uganda and Kenya and in some of the countries I know, the governments had no option but to borrow money to also add already to the existing debt crisis so that they can be able to buy the vaccines. That has been going on. We've heard of billions of dollars that governments are now going to be able to afford this, but it shouldn't be like that, you know, so right now, we depend on donations and on the small quantity the government can buy, you know. In Rwanda, we have a 12 million population size and less than 2 million people have been able to access vaccines, you know, because the affordability issue is still there, the capacity for countries to produce their own medicine is also still there, they are not resolved. And that also really continues to make it worse and put countries and people in general at a disadvantage. So, when, for example, we first got some of the first batch of vaccines in Rwanda, what was really also funny was how, for example, the first groups that were going to get the first vaccines, of course, there were politicians, the elderly people and the frontline workers, like teachers and people in the health sector. But, in addition to that, the first Oxford vaccines were also given to diplomats and expats. We're talking about people that come from foreign countries that can't afford or can't be able to travel when it comes to get vaccines. But no, the country had to do that, you know?. And then the rest of the population just had to wait until when the government can afford or when they can be able to get donations, you know? And we waited until now, ever since the vaccines started being there, we haven't yet been able to do that. And so if you talk about the already pre-existing inequalities and people that are mostly marginalized. Rwanda having more than 90 per cent of people in the informal sector, they are the last people that are going to get vaccinated.

**Shree [00:11:08]** Would you be able to speak a little bit more about how young feminist groups like Spectra and FEMNET or other youth groups in Africa have mobilised to deal with some of the effects of the pandemic on access to medicines? And any advice maybe you have for young feminists like myself or the people out there as to what they can do to involve themselves?

**Chantal [00:11:34]** It is really really true that young people in general and, to be specific, young women, sometimes we just feel like what can we do, how do we contribute, combat people's intersecting discriminations when it comes to young women that we face? You're not just young, you don't know what you're talking about, but you're also a woman like you know, then it comes in the whole sexist and patriarchal ideas about what a woman and a young person can do.

**Shree [00:11:58]** Exactly.

**Chantal [00:11:59]** It's really hard, you know? Today we are talking about the pandemic, the vaccines and these issues, but also other topics. In the past, it has really been difficult to get young women in these places as if they don't have enough to contribute or say. For me, I always say your existence and your life already is a reality enough to contribute and bring to the table. You do not have to have gone to have a Ph.D. or anything. Everybody's life and experiences on a daily basis is evidence enough about what needs to be done, and that person has all the experience about how they've been able to live, you know? Learn from that and contribute to the discussion about everything, because if you look at it, everything we talk about is intersecting in different ways and are linked in different ways, vaccines, life, health, wellbeing and all of that. So, when it came to the pandemic, I think for young feminists, let me say in Rwanda, I think it took some time to realise the effects, took some time because everyone, including us as activists who was struggling to also find peace with what was happening, was struggling to see what is going to happen to our lives. What's going to happen? Have a good survive. So I think it kind of took some time to kind of think we need to do and how we need to mobilise and do. So, in March 2020, when we first got the lockdown in Rwanda, for example, I remember my tweet said. It was addressed to police makers and decision makers and ministries and I was asking them: how do you expect people who eat only when they have walked on a daily basis are going to survive in this lockdown? We are talking about people who only make like less than a dollar a day, and they have to survive on that with their families on a daily basis. And then if you put people at home, like, how do you expect them to survive? So I put the tweet out there. I didn't even know what was going to happen, but kind of brought a lot of discussions amongst Rwandans and there was a lot of support and there were increased voices really calling on the government to expand social protection in order to provide some basic needs during lockdown because people were really like starving, you know, so and then with the vaccines and everything when we also started hearing that people can be able to get vaccines, you know? We organised different webinars, different meetings amongst families to really discuss about this whole issues around accessibility. So we mobilised around that and we'll continue to do that and also highlight that, you know, medicines and vaccines in general has always been a struggle, but not until we organise and mobilise and call on our government sand other governments, but also globally call on and name and shame countries that continue

to perpetuate inequalities. That's how we continue to organise and learn from other movements as well in the different parts of Africa.

**Shree [00:14:52]** It takes a lot more than it should for bigger government bodies or U.N. agencies to listen to women, and that could be inbuilt sexism. It could be, you know, general assumptions made on their part. So, I would also like to just kind of take this in a more positive direction, you know? Taking all of these issues into account, as you know, the exacerbated inequality, the distinction between what is essential and not essential and how that affects young women and girls in particular, and, finally, to the issue of access to vaccines itself, I just want to ask you, how do you think young African feminists and/or feminists around the world can imagine a post-pandemic world? What do you think they should or can expect?

**Chantal [00:15:37]** Currently, the talk of the mortal amount of post-pandemic world is building back better. But as feminists, what we really should be talking about, what we should be asking for is building back transformatively because we do not want to go back to normal, like people say. We want to go back by learning lessons about what the pandemic has shown us. [Inaudible] for a long time with quality in terms of inequalities, discrimination and, you know, really ensuring human dignity in all aspects. And, so, we don't want to just build back better, we are calling for building back transformatively TRIPS selectively this build back. But as we transform systems, structures, mindsets and all these issues and really showing that the qualities that are in place can be addressed because otherwise we'll just be playing games and going back to the same situation as if we didn't learn anything. So to do better, we need to really take the lessons from this pandemic, the impact of how such a pandemic, for example, in contexts that already have inequalities. Who suffers more and why? So, for example, why can't children and young people be safe in their homes? How do we correct that? Is it about the sexist and patriarchal system in place and mindsets that really puts young people in situations where they can be exploited, either by their neighbours or even by their own parents? How do we correct that? Because we cannot just base on schools, everybody needs to be safe anywhere. And the home, I think, is the first place everybody should feel safe and protected. Why are young girls getting more impregnated and raped in their homes? And, then you say, we need girls to go back to school, that's the solution. It shouldn't be the solution. We should also correct what we have at home. For example, why are women more likely to be fired from jobs from small businesses and all during the crisis and the ones that are more likely to get poorer, you know? Why is that? Why do we have a gender pay gap? How do you correct that? Transformatively is not just go back to what we had, but also take lessons about who is really hit by the pandemic and why. But I think the pandemic was like some kind of hard core evidence to show and then we are like, you see, that's what we meant when we say we need to address issues, we need to address safety and protections of everybody in the homes and all that, we need to address and talk

about neocolonial and imperial development models that we have in place in Global South, for example, that really continue to keep our states in a vulnerable situation and at the mercy of the Global North, you know? How do we correct that? We don't want to go back to how things were, but how do we make sure that states big and small, different contexts, how do we talk about a really equal kind of say on the table in terms of politics and in terms of what countries can be able to do for their own people? Then, we need to recognise and continuously highlight that we have many pandemics. For example, in Africa, let's talk about in Africa there's a climate crisis, there is wars and conflicts, there's gender inequalities and gender-based violations, but also pandemics if you look at them. Who gets to call this a pandemic, and then cannot really emphasise more on how we need to talk about social protection of people. How do we make sure that at least whatever is going on, human beings, young women and girls, have at least the best in terms of things that really ensure a dignified life, just food, safety, a decent housing, access to water. In 2021, we are still addressing these issues. The last point is that we've been talking about sustainable development and sustainable development goals, but this cannot be achieved at all unless we want to continue to play the game. This cannot be achieved if we do not really address these deep inequalities, discriminations and issues that continue to put human lives at risk in different contexts.

**Shree [00:19:32]** Chantal, I 100 percent agree. I mean, everything you just said, it just it leads back to the conclusion that the old system is not working, the current system that now, you know, people are just trying to kind of recycle and put into a new, literally, it's called new colonialism because it's not working anymore. Everyone needs to wake up and realise that. Like, we cannot go back. We have to be transformative, as you said. And I think the reason why it's so important to have this discussion regarding young people and young women and girls is because we are the future, right? It is up to us now to dismantle this old system and bring a more transformative lens to everything, starting with the fact that not everyone is on a level playing field, as you said, you know. And I also just want to summarise and say that what you said about this particular COVID-19 pandemic showing us how makeshift our policies have been in addressing inequalities that arise due to intersectionality. They are not robust, they are not resilient, they fell apart the minute it was pushed at the slightest. So, it is unfortunate that it took so long and it took a pandemic in the 21st century for us to realise this. Actually, Chantal, I just wanted to know more about Spectra and, you know, where the idea of it came from exactly, you know, the history of it. That would be really interesting to know.

**Chantal [00:21:00]** So, I prior to setting Spectra, I had worked in the civil society organisations in Uganda for more than 15 years, you know? I started working when I was really young, I think when I was like 17 and after I did my masters, I would thought like, I think I was privileged enough to be able to get into the feminist movement when I was still young and I could see

there were issues around intergenerational gaps and knowledge gap about how young women and girls can also be part of the discourse and narrative change and everything. We had, the majority of organisations that we are working with, there were organisations that were led by elder women who would only occasionally bring in young girls, you know? Things that I thought or I thought was more about tokenism, but not really engaging them meaningfully for them to take the lead. So Spectra was founded from this experience to create the space for intergenerational dialogue, but also to really make specifically for young women and girls to be there, you do not have to be educated, you don't have to have to do anything and also to address this elitism. I don't know how I can call it. Or feminism, well, if you like you have to have gone to school, you have to have a masters in gender equality for you to be part of the feminist movement. Like, no, any woman, any girl, anywhere should and has to be part of this movement. Like I said, everyone's life is enough for them to share their experience. And so Spectra is based on that whole idea that young women and girls have to [inaudible] and doesn't have to be the people that have gone to school, it should be everybody. To talk about the issues, to do activism and to do anything that they want to contribute in terms of changing the issues that keep affecting their lives in different ways. So that's the idea. We're just still a feminist group. We are just, as an organization yet, but we're working on that, so that's the picture.

**Shree [00:22:54]** So I'm 24, which means, I am entering the realms of full-fledged adulthood, so I feel that I still get the "You're too young, you don't know what you're talking about" dialogue a lot, especially from my family. And, of course, you know, as a woman, it has, it still holds some connotations, right, in terms of how they do talk to you or the kind of things they expect from you at a certain age.

**Chantal [00:23:17]** It's a constant struggle. I mean, even in Rwanda we still have the same issues, you know, you're young and crazy, you don't know what you are talking about.

**Shree [00:23:27]** Yes, my parents' idea of what I do as a 24-year-old is very different from what I actually do, so.

**Chantal [00:23:35]** I've had a lot of that thrown in my face everywhere I went, in conferences where I felt like just there to fill the lines, to be tokenised, to sit on the table and say "we have a young person, but I feel like they're not even listening to what I'm saying.

**Shree [00:23:51]** I guess it's like a two-way thing, right? Because that also deters younger people to play an active role or being interested in these spaces. It's always like, Oh, you know, I'm not learnt enough, I haven't gone to school enough. I haven't done x y z things enough.

**Chantal [00:24:13]** So yeah, and that makes young people also feel like "Oh, it's a privilege for me to be here". Like, no, it's not a privilege. You deserve to be there. So at then, we get there, I remember like when I first went to the UN in a New York meeting and I would have to be on a



panel speaking about young people's sexual reproductive rights issues and stuff like that. And I felt so lost and there was no guidance in terms of everything. And we were just talking about: "Oh, this is Chantal from Rwanda, she is here to talk about...". I just felt like I felt bad and really stupid about how the whole thing was about, and I just felt like it shouldn't be like this. I'm not here to be like, you know, a product or anything, just you talk about issues that have been going on in my life, my family, my community, just like you all are in the whole UN thing that some people do. At that time, I also felt like "Oh, it's amazing that I'm here". But now I think looking back, I'm like, "No, young people should not feel like that". Everybody can be sure that it has to be hard, you know?

**Shree [00:25:11]** It's a fine line, I think, between respecting your elders and also understanding your true value as a young person. It's also a cultural thing, right? I mean, like in Indian society, it's a lot of emphasis on respecting your elders and not questioning them. And so, yeah, and you're constantly told, you know, "You're being done a favour, you know, you have to be thankful". Of course you should be thankful, but you know, yeah, it's a debt to repay. That's sometimes how it is put across.

**Chantal [00:25:42]** Yeah, very, very true. I mean, it's the same culture in Rwanda and in the most African states that I know. Respect your elder, do not speak to them in a certain way. But these are things, for example, that, you know, come from the whole socialisation about how we treat young people, even from birth, when they're still young people [00:26:00] or toddlers. [0.1s] How do we empower young people even when they're still young [00:26:04][inaudible]? [0.0s] But whatever they have to say matters.

**Shree [00:26:09]** Chantal, it was lovely having you, and thank you so much for these wonderful insights. Whatever you have shared with us today is also very full of hope, which I appreciate personally as well as a young feminist, so thank you very much. It's been an absolute privilege to have you.

**Vanita [00:26:30]** The Feminists for A People's Vaccine podcast is produced by DAWN - Development, Alternatives with Women for a New Era and TWN - the Third World Network. Today's episode was edited by Alice Furtado and engineered by Ernesto Sena. Thank you for joining us today. I'm Vanita Nayak Mukherjee. See you on the next episode!