

## Geocultural Epistemologies of Women's Empowerment: Reclaiming the Legacy of African Philosophy

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# Geocultural Epistemologies of Women's Empowerment

RECLAIMING THE LEGACY  
OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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& Janaka Jayawickrama

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the predominance of epistemologies from the Global North in defining and assessing women's empowerment in African contexts. It argues that mainstream frameworks, particularly those focused on individualistic models and economic participation rates, often fail to capture Africa's socio philosophical realities. Drawing on decolonial theory, geo-cultural epistemological approaches, and Afro-feminist scholarship, this article posits that engaging with indigenous African philosophies is crucial for developing a transformative and contextually relevant discourse on empowerment. Through systematic philosophical analysis, this research investigates how Ubuntu, the Akan Philosophy of Personhood, and Communalism reconceptualize agency, personhood, and power. The methodology combines conceptual analysis, critical literature review, and philosophical reconstruction to examine how these frameworks provide substantive alternatives to individualistic models prevalent

in development policy. The findings demonstrate that these philosophies establish a robust ethical foundation for reimagining women's empowerment through relational agency, ontological recognition of women's value, and community-oriented advancement. The discussion is further enriched by a decolonial feminist perspective on gender equality programming, which underscores the practical failures of interventions uninformed by local epistemologies. This research contributes to epistemic decolonization in practice by offering a coherent, culturally grounded framework that challenges the individualism relationality binary in feminist theory and bridges philosophical discourse with development praxis. The study proposes relational empowerment indicators and recommends empirical case study research to validate and refine this model in diverse African contexts.

### **Keywords**

*African Philosophy; Akan Personhood; Communalism; Empowerment; Ubuntu*

## **Introduction**

In today's capitalist standards rooted in the Euro-North American tradition, Africa is characterized as a continent suffering from underdevelopment. However, this characterization itself requires critical examination. Walter Rodney's seminal work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), powerfully demonstrates that African underdevelopment is not a natural state or historical accident but rather the direct consequence of European capitalist exploitation through slavery, colonialism, and neo colonial economic arrangements. Rodney argues that the present state of African economies cannot be understood without recognizing how centuries of resource extraction, forced labor, and structural imposition fundamentally redirected African development for European benefit. Similarly, Samir Amin (1972, 1976) conceptualizes this as 'unequal development,' wherein global capitalism systematically produces wealth in core regions while simultaneously generating poverty in peripheral regions through exploitative exchange rela-

tions. Ake (1979, 1996) extends this analysis by examining how colonial political economies dismantled indigenous production systems and instituted new forms of dependency that persisted after formal independence. These scholars collectively establish that contemporary African economic conditions are products of deliberate historical processes rather than cultural deficiencies or developmental failures. Furthermore, Mamdani (1996) illuminates how colonial governance bifurcated African societies through indirect rule, creating lasting institutional legacies that continue to shape contemporary governance and social relations. This structural understanding of underdevelopment provides the necessary context for examining how the frameworks from the Global North for women's empowerment carry embedded assumptions about development, progress, and social organization that may perpetuate rather than challenge these colonial legacies.

These colonial assumptions extend beyond economic development to shape dominant understandings of social organization, including prevailing conceptions of gender and women's empowerment. The concept of gender as a social construct, which prescribes roles, responsibilities, and rights, is foundational in contemporary gender studies. These constructed roles, varying across cultures and historical periods, often institutionalize inequalities that disproportionately affect women (Connell, 2009; Lorber, 1994). Such inequalities are, in large part, rooted in Euro centric epistemologies that impose a rigid binary division between masculine and feminine roles, a division that not only marginalizes women but also erases the more fluid, relational, and communal understandings of gender that exist within African, Asian, and Latin American knowledge systems (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Nzegwu, 2006). By treating this binary as universal, dominant gender frameworks have naturalized hierarchies that are, in fact, historically and culturally specific.

A primary response to such inequality has been the promotion of women's empowerment, which has been conceptualized as a transformative process that enables women to challenge and alter unequal structures (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). However, these empowerment frameworks are themselves largely situated within epistemo-

logical traditions from the Global North, relying on liberal notions of individual agency, autonomy, and rights that reflect particular political histories from Europe and North America. This poses a fundamental contradiction: the tools being deployed to dismantle gender inequality are drawn from the same epistemological tradition that produced and sustained it. As Afro feminist scholars have argued, meaningful transformation requires engaging with knowledge systems that were never complicit in these hierarchies to begin with, rather than reproducing the logics of the very structures one seeks to challenge (Mama, 1997; Steady, 1981). Beyond these debates, alternative approaches have also emerged from Latin American scholarship and social movements, emphasizing collective rather than purely individual forms of empowerment. Drawing on indigenous, peasant, and communitarian traditions, these perspectives conceptualize empowerment as the collective capacity of subordinate groups to defend their ways of life, construct alternative forms of development, and pursue long-term social transformation through organization, cultural mobilization, and participatory leadership (Otero & Gürcan, 2024). Such contributions demonstrate that critiques of liberal individualism are not unique to Africa and suggest broader possibilities for grounding empowerment in culturally embedded and community-centred forms of agency.

Women's empowerment is recognized as a central measure of social progress and is embedded in Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). While this represents an important global commitment, the frameworks underpinning SDG 5 remain predominantly shaped by mainstream institutional epistemologies, with a conspicuous absence of African, Asian, and Latin American ways of understanding gender, community, and power. This epistemological gap is not merely academic; rather, it has practical consequences for the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of gender interventions across diverse cultural contexts. It is precisely this gap that the article seeks to address, by centring non Western epistemological perspectives as analytical frameworks in their own right, rather than as addenda to a Euro centric core.

According to the United Nations, women's empowerment is defined as the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices (UNESCWA, 2013). It serves both as an intrinsic goal and a means to achieve instrumental outcomes, including improvements in health and nutrition for women and their children, increased autonomy over sexuality and fertility, and the reduction and prevention of intimate partner violence (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Consequently, measuring women's empowerment has become essential for evidence based development policy (Alkire et al., 2013).

A substantial body of scholarship grounded in decolonial theory contends that mainstream definitions of gender and empowerment are fundamentally linked to European and North American epistemologies (Lugones, 2007; Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Oyěwùmí, 1997). It is also noteworthy that, much like collective empowerment theory (Otero & Gürcan, 2024), decolonial theory has its intellectual origins in Latin America, where it emerged as a critique of Eurocentric epistemologies and as an effort to recover alternative forms of knowledge rooted in the historical experiences and struggles of colonized societies. This poses significant challenges in African contexts, where colonialism, slavery, and resource extraction have systematically undermined indigenous systems and imposed Western modernity (Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). For instance, in South Africa, post-apartheid affirmative action policies, while aimed at addressing racial inequalities, often employ a Eurocentric framework for gender equality that fails to appreciate or incorporate indigenous understandings of gender roles (Gouws, 2017). Scholars such as Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2007, 2011) argue that modernity stems from Europe and North America is maintained through a coloniality of power that privileges knowledge from the Global North while marginalizing others. Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) extends this critique directly to the terrain of knowledge production, demonstrating how intellectual imperialism continues to frame African studies in ways that subordinate indigenous epistemologies and render African thought peripheral to global theoretical debates. In his analysis, decolonization of African studies is not merely a

political project but an epistemological imperative that requires the recovery and recentering of African concepts on their own terms. Therefore, there is an urgent need for epistemic decolonization, described as a ‘decolonization of the mind’ (Thiong’o, 1986), to facilitate the emergence of alternative knowledge systems.

The geopolitics of knowledge production assumes particular salience here. Tickner and Wæver (2009) propose the notion of geocultural epistemologies to capture how location, both geographical and cultural, shapes the production of knowledge, particularly within international relations and development theory. Their framework reveals that what passes as universal theory is often the particular experience of the Global North, projected onto the rest of the world as a norm. In the context of gender and empowerment, geocultural epistemologies demand that we interrogate the spatial and cultural origins of concepts such as agency, autonomy, and equality, and open space for epistemologies that emerge from distinct historical and cultural matrices. This article answers this call by taking African philosophies not as objects of comparative curiosity but as generators of emancipatory knowledge in their own right.

African philosophers draw upon traditional structures and values to develop contemporary theories relevant to African societies (Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 1980, 1996). These cultural frameworks address fundamental philosophical questions regarding reality, human identity, and ethical conduct. Although such inquiries exist across Euro North American, Asian, Native American, and African philosophies, women’s experiences and knowledge rooted in traditional cultures have historically been marginalized (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2006). Such marginalization has impeded the articulation and implementation of feminist discourse concerning women’s empowerment in these societies. Additionally, feminist perspectives from the Global North often emphasize public equality, economic independence, and individual rights, which may not fully align with the lived realities of women in the Global South (Mikell, 1997; Nzegwu, 2006; Steady, 1981). Udenigwe, Aubel, and Abimbola (2026) provide a compelling contemporary illustration: their

examination of gender equality programming in the Global South from a decolonial feminist perspective reveals persistent mismatches between program designs grounded in Euro-North American idea of individualism and the communal realities of the intended beneficiaries. They argue that such programmes often fail not because of a lack of resources or political will, but because they are built on epistemological foundations that are foreign to the contexts they seek to transform.

This article addresses the need to engage African epistemologies in reframing the discourse on women's empowerment. It adopts the definition of African philosophy as a critical and reflective inquiry into the origins, values, and cosmology that inform life and identity for the African individual (Ramose, 2003; Serequeberhan, 1991). The central argument is that African philosophical concepts, although historically marginalized by colonial and neo colonial knowledge systems, offer significant insights for developing a contextually relevant and transformative model of women's empowerment. By analyzing the principles of Ubuntu, the Akan Philosophy of Personhood, and Communalism, the article evaluates their potential to shape the social, political, and economic empowerment of African women. The article also argues that integrating these African philosophical viewpoints provides a cohesive framework that aligns empowerment strategies with indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. In doing so, it directly contributes to the decolonization of gender studies by offering a positive reconstruction that moves beyond critique toward an actionable, philosophically grounded alternative.

## Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative research design grounded in philosophical inquiry and critical textual analysis. The methodology integrates three complementary approaches: conceptual analysis, critical literature review, and philosophical reconstruction. This multi method approach was particularly appropriate for examining abstract philosophical concepts and their practical implications for

social transformation (Wiredu, 1980; Outlaw, 2004). Particularly, conceptual analysis is conducted by systematically identifying key concepts in textual materials, examining how their meanings evolve across different historical contexts, and interpreting the relationships among concepts to uncover their underlying ideological and political significance. In turn, critical review refers to an interpretive method that systematically evaluates and synthesizes existing scholarship in a field by identifying its strengths, weaknesses, contradictions, controversies, and gaps in order to assess the state of knowledge and suggest directions for future research (Gürcan, 2022; Otero & Gürcan, 2024). Conceptual analysis is used to interpret the meanings and interrelationships of Ubuntu, Akan personhood, and communalism as alternative foundations for women's empowerment, while critical review is employed to evaluate existing scholarship on empowerment and gender theory, identifying the limitations of prevailing approaches and the opportunities for developing culturally grounded alternatives.

The article adopts an interpretive philosophical paradigm, recognizing that knowledge is constructed through engagement with cultural and historical contexts (Crotty, 1998). This paradigm is consistent with the decolonial epistemological stance that challenges the universality of knowledge frameworks from the Global North and affirms the validity of multiple ways of knowing (Santos, 2014). It also aligns with the geocultural epistemologies approach (Tickner & Wæver, 2009), which holds that theoretical insight cannot be divorced from the location of the knower. The study does not seek to test hypotheses in the positivist tradition but rather to explore, interpret, and reconstruct philosophical concepts to reveal their potential for addressing contemporary social challenges. In this sense, the methodology itself enacts a decolonial move by refusing the hierarchy that places empirically verifiable, quantitative knowledge above interpretive and philosophical understanding.

## Decoloniality and Afro-Feminism: A Theoretical Framework

This analysis is situated at the intersection of decolonial theory and Afro feminism. Decoloniality, as articulated by Mignolo (2007, 2011), seeks to disengage from the dominance of modernity, exposing its underlying coloniality and enabling the emergence of multiple forms of knowledge and existence. For Mignolo, the decolonial option is not simply an abstract academic exercise but a praxis of epistemic disobedience that challenges the very foundations of European and North American claims to universality. Quijano (2000) identified the coloniality of power as the enduring structure that organizes global hierarchies of race, labor, gender, and knowledge according to Eurocentric criteria, even after formal colonialism ended. His analysis reveals that the marginalization of knowledge systems in the Global South is not accidental but is constitutive of the modern/colonial world order. Building on these foundations, Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) specifically addresses the terrain of African studies, demonstrating how intellectual imperialism operates through methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and citational practices that systematically render African thinkers invisible or merely illustrative. His call for a decolonized African studies demands that African philosophies be treated as equal partners in global theoretical conversations, a demand that this article extends to feminist and empowerment theorizing.

The decolonial project, as further theorized by Maldonado Torres (2007) and Grosfoguel (2007), involves not merely political independence but a fundamental transformation of knowledge structures, subjectivities, and power relations established during colonialism. Grosfoguel's notion of the 'epistemic decolonial turn' insists on recognizing the entangled nature of power and knowledge, such that altering global power asymmetries requires epistemological pluralism. This framework positions African philosophies as valid epistemological standpoints rather than anthropological curiosities (Hountondji, 1996). Within this tradition, this article performs a form of epistemic disobedience by refusing simply to

apply feminist categories from the Global North to African contexts and instead deriving its categories of empowerment from Africa's own intellectual heritage.

African feminist scholars have consistently critiqued the universalizing tendencies of feminism from Europe and North America, which frequently positions the woman's experience in that context as the normative model for liberation (Amadiume, 1987; Mama, 1997; Mohanty, 2003). Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that gender, as a primary category of social organization, is a colonial import in many African societies, where seniority rather than gender constituted a more significant organizing principle. Consequently, any empowerment initiative must be examined through this critical lens to prevent the perpetuation of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988). Udenigwe, Aubel, and Abimbola (2026) concretely demonstrate how such epistemic violence plays out in development practice. Their decolonial feminist analysis of gender equality programming shows that interventions designed without attention to local cosmologies, relational personhood, and communitarian values often meet resistance, generate confusion, or simply fail to take root. They therefore argue for a fundamental re orientation of development programming toward what they term a 'decolonial feminist praxis', which begins with the epistemological and ontological premises of the communities involved. The article resonates deeply with this call, aiming to articulate an empowerment discourse that is both philosophically grounded in African thought and responsive to the critiques and priorities of African women.

The framework of geocultural epistemologies proposed by Tickner and Wæver (2009) further enriches this theoretical intersection. By insisting that knowledge is produced from specific geocultural locations and that the pretense of a universal, view from nowhere epistemology is itself a product of Global North hegemony, they provide a meta theoretical justification for the project undertaken here. When applied to gender and empowerment, a geo-cultural epistemological lens reveals that concepts like empowerment are not neutral because they carry assumptions about the self, society, and the good life that are culturally specific. The task,

then, is not merely to include African voices in existing frameworks but to allow distinct geocultural epistemologies to reshape the very meaning of empowerment. This article therefore draws upon decolonial theory, Afro feminism, and geocultural epistemology to construct an alternative framework that is both philosophically robust and practically attuned to African socio cultural realities.

A major critique of this approach is the potential to romanticize African philosophies that may themselves be patriarchal. Rather than dismissing this concern, the article positions it as a central tension guiding the analysis. It acknowledges that concepts such as community, custom, and personhood have historically been used to justify the exclusion and control of women (Nzegwu, 2006). For instance, in certain traditional contexts, communal decision making has been dominated by male elders, thereby limiting women's representation (Tripp et al., 2009). Customary laws related to land ownership and inheritance have also frequently marginalized women (Peterman, 2012; Tripp, 2004). It is essential to distinguish between tradition based patriarchy, rooted in longstanding cultural norms, and colonially amplified patriarchy, which intensifies these norms through imposed power structures during and after colonization (Mama, 2011). This distinction reframes feminist reclamation as an engagement with tradition, aiming to extract core ethical principles and restore their pre colonial inclusive intentions.

Feminist reclamation is evident in movements where women have redefined traditional roles, such as the creation of inclusive decision making circles in various African communities (Tripp, 2000). The objective is not to reject Ubuntu or Akan thought wholesale but to pursue a rigorous feminist reclamation of their foundational ethical principles. This process necessitates distinguishing the ethical core of these philosophies from their patriarchal distortions. For instance, if the essence of Ubuntu is encapsulated in 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through other persons), therefore, practices that deny women full personhood, such as exclusion or violence, fundamentally violate the principles of Ubuntu (Metz, 2007; Ramose, 1999). Similarly, if Akan philosophy confers ontological value through matrilineage,

denying women land or political voice undermines its cosmological principles (Gyekye, 1996). By holding these traditions to their highest ethical standards, it becomes possible to utilize their internal logic for critique and transformation, thereby moving beyond the binary of modernity versus tradition. This approach also embodies the decolonial feminist praxis advocated by Udenigwe et al. (2026), who contend that meaningful programming must work with the grain of local ethical systems rather than against them.

## Foundational Concepts of African Philosophies

Pre-colonial Africa exhibited the conceptual development of philosophical worldviews that emerged from the earliest human habitation on the continent. The pre colonial phase began approximately at the beginning of human habitation in Africa, with the earliest cultures of *Homo sapiens* considered to be essentially African in origin (Diop, 1974). These earliest human beings played a conceptually constructive role in defining humanity, human self understanding, naming future generations, and elaborating the distinguishing features of the human condition. They can therefore be said to have played the principal analytical role in elaborating and explicating a distinctive African philosophical identity that reflects fundamental aspects of humankind (Ramose, 2003).

African philosophies are accessible to all individuals, although only some develop the expertise to articulate them explicitly (Hountondji, 1996). The formalization of philosophy as a discipline within Global North traditions has contributed to the perception that only scholars from Europe and North America are its authors. This perception itself is a manifestation of the intellectual imperialism critiqued by Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) and has created conceptual challenges among modern Africans, prompting discourse aimed at redefining these traditions as Afrocentric and necessitating a re examination of gender and empowerment issues (Wiredu, 1996). The coloniality of knowledge described by Quijano (2000) thus operates not only through political and economic structures but

through the very categories of thought that Africans are expected to use in understanding themselves.

Consequently, many modern Africans justify their way of life using Euro-North American philosophical frameworks. This situation necessitates a re evaluation of African philosophy, which may encounter resistance from traditionalists who previously practiced what is now termed African philosophy. These shifts reveal deeper theoretical underpinnings, including the adoption of formal written structures, the spread of gender ideologies, and the globalization of knowledge and practice (Appiah, 1992; Wiredu, 1980). In geocultural epistemological terms, this represents the dominance of a particular geo cultural location (the modern West) over others, rendering alternative ways of knowing invisible or folkloric (Tickner & Wæver, 2009).

A common mischaracterization contrasts that Euro-North American philosophies, deemed abstract and universal, with an equally monolithic African philosophy, seen as practical and concrete. This is an oversimplification. African philosophy, like their counterparts in the rest of the world, is diverse, containing ontological, epistemological, and ethical inquiries (Gyekye, 1995, 1997). Its distinctiveness lies not in a lack of abstraction but in its embeddedness within specific cultural, historical, and cosmological frameworks. As Gbadegesin (1991) notes, African philosophy reflects the basic assumptions and categories needed to make sense of African institutions and practices. It is derived from close investigation of ideologies, political structures, and religious practices. Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) insists that recognizing this intellectual complexity is foundational to decolonizing African studies; without it, African thought remains stuck in a comparative cage, always measured against a Euro-North American standard. The pre colonial phase of African philosophy, dating to the earliest human habitation on the continent, involved a conceptual development of worldviews that addressed fundamental questions of reality, humanity, and ethics. The contemporary project is therefore one of recovery, re examination, and reconstruction of these thought systems for present day challenges, including gender inequality (Wiredu, 1996). This article

contributes to that project by demonstrating that these philosophies offer not merely cultural validation but rigorous conceptual resources for rethinking women's empowerment.

## **Conceptual Analysis and Its Relevance to Women's Empowerment**

This section analyzes the three key philosophical concepts, clarifying their core principles and their specific implications for rethinking women's empowerment.

### **Ubuntu: Relationality and Collective Agency**

The Nguni proverb 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through other persons) sums up the ethic of Ubuntu, emphasizing that personhood is realized through reciprocal relationships and communal harmony rather than as an innate individual property (Ramose, 1999; Shutte, 2001). An Ubuntu informed model of empowerment shifts the focus from individual autonomy to relational agency. Empowerment is conceptualized as women realizing their full potential within and for the community, rather than simply becoming absorbed into the community itself. This relational understanding directly challenges the atomistic individualism that, according to Udenigwe et al. (2026), underlies many failed gender equality programmes in the Global South. Where those programmes assume that empowerment means women becoming independent decision makers in isolation, Ubuntu suggests that genuine empowerment is expressed through the quality of one's relationships and one's ability to contribute to the collective good.

This perspective redefines leadership and power. For example, motherhood, when viewed through Ubuntu, serves as a foundation for a leadership style characterized by nurturing, protection, community building, and altruism (Metz & Gaie, 2010). A woman's power is thus derived from her networked relationships and her capacity to foster collective wellbeing, challenging the atomistic individualism of liberal models. Leaders, much like mothers, serve as

protectors, pillars, and community builders, demonstrating a commitment to the well being of their communities. Leadership behaviours associated with motherhood encompass monitoring, talent identification and development, empowerment, planning, foresight, approachability, adaptability, relationship building, multi-tasking, attentive listening, relationship management, altruism, compassion, and fairness (Metz, 2007). In geocultural epistemological terms, the Ubuntu framing does not simply add an African gloss to a European or North American concept of leadership; it reconstitutes the very meaning of power from a relational ontology. This aligns with Tickner and Wæver's (2009) argument that distinct geocultural sites produce distinct theoretical categories, not merely different empirical data.

### Akan Philosophy of Personhood

The Akan philosophy offers a complex theory of personhood. A person (*onipa*) is a composite of a spiritual element (*okra*, the life force from God) and a bodily element, with their identity and moral status deeply tied to their ancestry and lineage (Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 1996). It is essential for those interested in complex, coherent, and fully developed thought processes to explore the vibrant discourse within the Akan thought tradition. Such an investigation should highlight the practical aspect of this thought. Furthermore, the various experiences that people encounter within the socio ecological system of the Akan worldview are important to understanding Akan philosophy (Gyekye, 1997). When articulated, this offers the Akan the opportunity to develop paradigmatic Akan led answers or responses to problems of their time, such as women's empowerment.

This worldview offers a profound ontological foundation for valuing women. Within the matrilineal system of many Akan groups, the woman is the vital link through which lineage, identity, and inheritance are passed (*abusua*) (Gyekye, 1996). This is not merely a social role but a cosmological one, positioning women as central to the community's continuity and stability. The Akan social

and moral philosophy holds that the moral status or value of an individual is derived from their nature as a person. Personhood, however, according to the philosophy, resides in the individual's ancestry and is determined by descent. It is believed that human beings are born of a heavenly god, meaning that people consist of two parts or personalities: a spiritual aspect and a bodily aspect (Wiredu, 1996).

The theory of personhood helps recognize the intrinsic value of African philosophy, as it acknowledges the vital role it plays in fostering indigenous culture and promoting development, protecting rights, cultivating good citizenship, and empowering women. However, contemporary land policies in Ghana complicate women's land inheritance rights, contrasting sharply with the matrilineal heritage that positions women as central figures in the lineage. For example, the Land Act 2020 (Act 1036) has implications that may limit the full capacity of women to inherit familial lands, thereby highlighting the philosophical policy gap that necessitates a restoration aligned with traditional values (Odotei & Awedoba, 2006). This gap illustrates precisely the kind of intellectual imperialism that Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) critiques: legal frameworks imposed through colonial and post colonial governance override indigenous epistemological and ontological orders, replacing them with European and North American property models that fail to see women as anything other than individuals with abstract rights.

Women's empowerment in this context involves recognizing and revitalizing the structural and spiritual significance inherent in matrilineal systems. This approach advocates for securing women's rights to land, political representation, and cultural authority, framing these not as external impositions but as restorations of their ontologically established roles within the social order. Empirical studies of matrilineal societies, particularly among the Akan and related groups in Ghana, indicate that women's land rights significantly enhance their agency and participation in community leadership (Peterman, 2012). Furthermore, examining Akan women's agency and spiritual empowerment through the concept of personhood is essential, especially in light of its emphasis on nominalism

and the belief that embodying godliness constitutes the highest human aspiration (Gyekye, 1997). In this way, Akan philosophy provides an internal cultural and spiritual rationale for women's empowerment that is far more compelling than appeals to abstract, externally derived rights discourse.

### Communalism

In African philosophy, the concept of communalism is the socio ethical principle that prioritizes the community over the individual. It asserts that the welfare of the group is the ultimate goal of human endeavour, and individual identity is inextricably linked to the collective (Gyekye, 1997; Menkiti, 1984). Examining women's empowerment within Africa's philosophical context could enhance its transformative capacity. A communalist approach to empowerment critiques the Western model for its excessive focus on individual economic advancement, which can disrupt social cohesion. The decolonial feminist analysis by Udenigwe et al. (2026) documents this disruption, showing that when empowerment programmes ignore communitarian values, they can inadvertently isolate women from the very networks that sustain them. In contrast, a communalist model views women's advancement as inseparable from the wellbeing of the whole community.

From this perspective, true women's empowerment is not measured solely by a woman's personal income or assets but by how her advancement contributes to and transforms the well being of her entire community. Women's empowerment should include not only the allocation of resources, as measured by conventional development metrics, but also the additional value generated through collective processes. This perspective calls for development paradigms that move beyond inclusion within existing unequal structures and instead seek to transform social relations (Kabeer, 2005). Empowerment is thus conceptualized as a collective process, where the advancement of one woman is intrinsically connected to the progress of all, fostering networks of mutual support and shared advancement.

Overall, this section contends that women's empowerment necessitates a re examination of social relations, moving beyond the Western model of individualism that prioritizes inclusion and participation. Contemporary interpretations of African philosophy should foreground communalist thought, emphasizing relationships and interconnectedness. Although communalism is often marginalized in favour of individualism as a marker of modernity, Tickner and Wæver's (2009) geocultural epistemologies framework reminds us that such marginalization is not an intellectual necessity but a geopolitical effect. The development sector, therefore, should recognize the importance of communalist rights and move toward an approach that values the interdependence of development paradigms. This requires a reassessment of the current emphasis on gender specific indicators to achieve both individual and collective objectives (Metz, 2007).

## **Tensions and Synthesis**

While these philosophies offer valuable resources, their application presents significant challenges. A primary concern is the patriarchal interpretation of communitarian values, which has historically suppressed women's agency (Nzegwu, 2006). Uncritical idealization of tradition can be counterproductive. Therefore, it is necessary to engage critically with these philosophies, recovering their emancipatory potential while systematically identifying and eliminating patriarchal elements. Ndlovu Gatsheni (2025) warns against the trap of nativism, where decolonization becomes a simple reversal of colonial hierarchies rather than a critical engagement with tradition. The article heeds this warning; the aim is not to romanticize pre colonial Africa but to subject these philosophies to rigorous feminist scrutiny, asking which elements can be mobilized for liberation and which must be reformed.

Furthermore, synthesizing these concepts can produce a robust framework. Ubuntu establishes the ethical imperative of relationality, Akan personhood provides an ontological basis for women's inherent value, and communalism prioritizes the collective good as

the ultimate objective. Collectively, these philosophies can form the foundation for an empowerment model that is simultaneously agential, valued, and community oriented. This synthesis aligns with the decolonial feminist praxis articulated by Udenigwe et al. (2026), who demonstrate that successful gender equality programming in the Global South often works through rather than against community structures, building on local ethical systems to catalyze change from within.

A key contribution of this analysis is the systematic reframing of indigenous concepts, transforming them from perceived obstacles into active resources for empowerment. Rather than viewing motherhood or community as impediments to liberal equality, the article demonstrates that these concepts, when critically examined, offer alternative models of power (Amadiume, 1987). This reframing shifts the discourse from questioning how African women can be liberated from their culture to exploring how the emancipatory potential within these cultural philosophies can be activated and enhanced. It also embodies the epistemological pluralism demanded by geo-cultural epistemologies (Tickner & Wæver, 2009), refusing the assumption that the Global North lexicon of empowerment—autonomy, choice, rights—exhausts the possibilities of human flourishing.

This reframing carries significant implications, which enable African women to express their aspirations using culturally resonant and meaningful language, rather than relying on external frameworks that may be alienating (Oyèwùmí, 1997). It transforms sources of perceived marginalization into foundations for agency. For instance, a woman advocating for her rights can invoke the Akan concept of the *Obaa* (woman/wife) not as a subordinate but as the essential conduit of lineage and stability, thereby making claims that are both culturally legitimate and morally compelling. This approach acknowledges the reality of oppression while providing a philosophically robust and culturally grounded platform for resistance. As Udenigwe et al. (2026) argue, sustainability in gender programming depends precisely on such internal resonance, where change is seen not as an alien imposi-

tion but as an unfolding of the community's own deepest ethical commitments.

Nevertheless, tensions remain. The communitarian emphasis on the collective good can, in practice, be deployed to silence women who assert individual needs that seem to conflict with community interests. The challenge is to develop a model of relational agency that does not simply replace the tyranny of the isolated individual with the tyranny of the community. The concept of 'relational empowerment indicators', proposed below, attempts to navigate this tension by measuring empowerment in terms of the quality of a woman's embeddedness in supportive, reciprocal relationships, rather than in terms of atomistic achievement or complete self sacrifice. This requires ongoing critical dialogue between philosophical ideals and empirical realities precisely the kind of dialogue that this article recommends as a research priority.

## Conclusion

This article argued that the pursuit of women's empowerment in Africa requires an epistemological shift away from hegemonic models from the Global North and toward a serious engagement with African philosophies. The analyses of Ubuntu, Akan personhood, and communalism demonstrate that these systems contain sophisticated conceptual tools for redefining power, agency, and the good life in ways that are deeply resonant with many African societal contexts. By drawing on the theoretical resources of decoloniality (Mignolo, 2007, 2011; Quijano, 2000), the geocultural epistemologies framework (Tickner & Wæver, 2009), and recent critiques of intellectual imperialism (Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2025) and decolonial feminist development praxis (Udenigwe et al., 2026), the article has provided both a critical diagnosis of the problem and a constructive proposal for a way forward.

The recommended approach is to enhance and diversify global discourses on gender equality by prioritizing epistemic justice. For policymakers, this entails developing empowerment indicators that reflect relational agency, community wellbeing, and cultural legiti-

macy. For scholars, it requires more extensive interdisciplinary research into Africa's diverse philosophical traditions and their practical implications for feminist praxis. Ultimately, empowering African women involves not only facilitating access to modernity but also co creating a future informed by the continent's philosophical heritage. Such co creation is at the heart of the decolonial option: not a rejection of all that is Western, but a pluriversal world in which many worlds and many epistemologies can coexist (Mignolo, 2011).

The general approach of the liberating tradition in African philosophies risks dismissing the differences in cultures and traditions as a means of presenting African thought. This appears to be contrary to feminists, who decry the presentation of African cultures as monolithic, ignoring differences and the oppression experienced by women within African societies (Mikell, 1997). Feminists appeal to a general feminist approach. However, presenting women's opinions is important to African feminists, especially those from grassroots communities. In Africa, all quests for knowledge, whether philosophical or otherwise, have long been intertwined with the search for the meaning of life and the improvement of humanity. African philosophy, and especially that of women, has occupied a considerably important place on the continent since time immemorial. African philosophy has played a crucial role in promoting poverty reduction by embracing inclusivity, recognizing differences, and understanding similarities that unite humanity (Nnaemeka, 2004). Ndlovu Gatsheni's (2025) call for a decolonized African studies that takes African philosophies seriously as theory by demonstrating how these philosophies can actively reshape global conversations on gender justice.

To maintain the relevance of the theoretical argument, the article advocates for the development of practical tools and research pathways. Specifically, it proposes the creation of relational indicators as a critical next step for praxis. These indicators would move beyond traditional metrics focused on individual income or decision making, instead assessing the strength of networks that shape a woman's environment. Potential measures include the density of

support alliances, recognized roles in communal conflict resolution, and the flow of resources mobilized through relationships for the advancement of family or community. This approach shifts policy objectives from fostering isolated, independent actors to cultivating strongly interconnected individuals within a supportive social fabric—exactly the kind of reorientation that Udenigwe et al. (2026) find essential for effective, decolonized gender programming.

To evaluate and refine this model, this article strongly recommends conducting empirical case study research. Africa offers numerous examples, including women’s farming cooperatives in Kenya, rotating savings associations such as susu or tontines in West Africa, and female traditional leadership structures in Malawi, among others. Qualitative research on these groups should investigate how internal power is negotiated, how success is defined, and how tensions between individual benefit and collective good are resolved. Gathering insights from women in these contexts will provide empirical support for the theoretical framework, illustrating how Ubuntu, communalism, and personhood are practised and adapted. Such research would not only validate the theoretical model but also produce a practical guide for culturally informed empowerment initiatives. It would further contribute to the broader project of building geocultural epistemologies that truly reflect the plural landscape of human knowledge and experience.

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