

# The origins of the feminist movement in Senegal: A social history of the pioneering Yewwu-Yewwi

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we explain the emergence of Yewwu-Yewwi, the first feminist movement in Senegal. The genealogy, as well as the objectives of the movement, are reconstructed and we analyze the sociopolitical context of its birth as well as the difficulties that the movement faced in order to impose its legitimacy on the Senegalese political, associative and institutional scene. The role of its central figures is drawn in all its complexity and Yewwu-Yewwi's action and relative success is precisely delineated through archival material and interviews with the protagonists of the process. Finally, the determinants of the elitist tendency of the movement are described in connection with the sociological, historical and political context of the time.*

**Keywords:** *Yewwu-Yewwi, Feminist movement, Women's leadership, Senegal, Siggil Jigeen network.*

## Résumé

*Dans cet article, les auteurs retracent le contexte et les acteurs de l'émergence de Yewwu-Yewwi, le premier mouvement féministe au Sénégal. La généalogie ainsi que les objectifs du mouvement sont précisés et les auteurs analysent le contexte sociopolitique de sa naissance ainsi que les difficultés auxquels le mouvement a fait face pour imposer sa légitimité sur la scène politique, associative et institutionnelle sénégalaise. Le rôle des personnalités centrales est clarifié dans*

*toute sa complexité relationnelle. Par ailleurs, l'action et le succès relatif de Yewwu-Yewwi sont délimités à travers l'analyse de documents d'archives et d'entrevues avec les protagonistes du processus. Enfin, l'article décrit les déterminants de la tendance élitiste du mouvement en relation avec le contexte sociologique, historique et politique sénégalais de l'époque.*

**Mots clés:** *Yewwu-Yewwi, mouvement féministe, leadership féminin, Sénégal, Réseau Siggil Jigeen*

## Introduction: The context

For women, this decade was one of the right to express oneself, in that this right was overcome or put forth, used spontaneously or in an organized fashion, amassed or even censured. We tolerated, liberated the right of women to speak about women. Women took this right in a space of freedom, freedom from surveillance and from all constraints. The many women's organizations created before and throughout this decade have each contributed in their own way to informing on and bringing attention to the oppression of women and proposed solutions and alternatives. From that point onward, the questioning of feminine statuses and roles was promoted at individual and collective levels no longer limited to women involved in politics, suffragists and feminists. In the space of one decade, African and international opinion have become sensitive to, alerted to, even taken advantage of, the difficulties endured by women in the world (Sow and Diouf, 1993 : 144).

The favourable international context of the 1970s had a significant influence on the Senegalese feminist movement in that women's organizations experienced a new liveliness with the creations of the *International Women's Year* and the *United Nations International Decade for Women*, both set forth in 1975. This context, with the crisis of the 1980s and the disengagement of the state following the introduction of "structural adjustment policies", composed a set of factors that led to the liberation of women's energy and spirit. Their dynamism was particularly visible in the associative movement that they created in both rural and urban areas in Senegal. Through these organizations, women began to create spaces within which they could try to improve their living conditions and to defend their rights. The women's associative network was quite diverse and was composed of rural associations, mutual assistance groups or small trading groups in rural and peri-urban zones, religious, professional or social action associations (composed of women from the urban lower-middle or middle-classes).

It is in this frame of reference that several leading associations of the women's associative movement were formed in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, the *Fédération*

*des Associations Féminines du Sénégal* (FAFS) was created following the organization by the *Soroptimist Club* of a seminar that brought together 13 associations and focused on “The status of women in Senegal”. The Fédération, still active today, in 1990 counted 185 members from a great diversity of backgrounds: women’s rights groups, rural associations and clubs, and professional and religious associations (Sow and Diouf, 1993 : 145). However, FAFS was often critical of these associations - which were largely dominated by the first generation of Senegalese elementary school teachers - for having limited their work to social actions that left the Senegalese patriarchal system intact. This orientation can be explained by the fact that this first generation of the Senegalese female elite were educated during the French colonial period. The training they received was very conservative with respect to gender relations and these early associations had a “conservative” approach in that they almost never questioned – theoretically or practically - policies affecting women. To the contrary, they inserted their work into the pre-existing patriarchal framework.

Around the middle of the 1970s, a new type of association appeared, its membership fundamentally professional and consisting of the first generations of Senegalese female university students. Among the groups that formed during this period, the *Amicale des Juristes Sénégalaises* (AJS) was founded in 1974 followed by the *Association des pharmaciennes* a few months later. Some of this elite female university-educated group set themselves distinctly apart, demarcating themselves from their elders by being relatively critical of the social action of the first women’s groups and making clear their desire to break with this type of intervention. Despite their merit, however, these professional associations themselves did not address the issue of the status of women in a perspective of sustainable economic and social change (Sow and Diouf, 1993 : 146).

The *Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFARD), created around the end of the 1970s, was the first intellectual feminist organization to denounce the living conditions of African women at a time when almost no research had been conducted on women in Africa. The AFARD brought together female African intellectuals to promote equal rights between men and women at the continental level and contributed greatly to the advancement of the status of African women and is still active today.

In the mid-1980s, a more radical discourse on the status of women would emerge in the women’s sections of leftist political parties and the appearance of groups such as *Yewwu-Yewwi* PLF (Pour la Libération de la Femme) in 1984. These movements, which situated themselves explicitly within the feminist movement, would identify the patriarchy as an ideological system justifying and legitimizing the subordination of women (Sow and Diouf, 1993 : 146-147). *Fippu*<sup>1</sup>, the journal of the feminist association *Yewwu-Yewwi*, advanced this proposition.

1 In Wolof, the main language used in Senegal, the term “fippu” means to find release from one’s state of lethargy through ending one’s situation of subordination.

What sets us apart of a feminist association is identifying all the mechanisms that, through education, taboos and customs, ideologies, cultures and religions, the division of labour between the sexes, and legislation, justifies and legitimizes the subordination of women. Even if we do not share the same approach as other women’s associations whose interventions are essentially limited to economic struggle, we are an integral part of a women’s associative movement that can only become richer in its diversity (Fippu, 1989 : 6).

It is important to note that these urban women’s associations were the first to publicly formulate the demands of women, giving them greater national and international visibility. Through the actions it proposed, the association *Yewwu-Yewwi* played a pioneering and original leadership role within the Senegalese women’s movement. The next section will look at the genesis of this association and address more precisely the forms that its contributions have taken.

### Genealogy of *Yewwu-Yewwi*

There has always been a surprising resistance by the dominant patriarchal culture and the various institutions that support it to recognizing the central place of women in traditional African society. This (female) power, notably economic and political, is still dominant in numerous African regions (among the Akan of the south-east Ivory Coast, in Togo, in Senegal...) (Fippu, 1989 : 51).

In many African countries in the 20th century, women’s liberation has been connected with and subordinate to objectives of national liberation (Fippu, 1989) in a context of struggles for independence. Even if these struggles for national independence highlighted numerous heroines who were determined to advance the feminist and/or national causes, it was not always easy to improve the status of women due to the hierarchization of priorities at the national level. This is why it was only in the 1980s that associations such as *Yewwu-Yewwi* began to form and substantive debate on the subject began to occur. Thus, for one of the first times ever in Senegal, an association openly proclaimed its feminist perspective by identifying the patriarchy – this ideological system justifying and legitimizing the subordination of women – as its primary target. The founding general assembly of *Yewwu-Yewwi* was held on January 7, 1984 at the Chamber of Commerce of Dakar. The creation of the organization was the result of long discussions between

the founding members concerning the strategy that would be adopted preceding its public launch. Members did not encounter any serious administrative obstacles as the association was already very present on the public stage. The official inauguration, accompanied with great pomp and heavy media presence at the Chamber of Commerce, allowed them to mediatize their activities and to later maintain the means of assuring the circulation of their messages.

The majority of the founders of *Yewwu-Yewwi* were motivated to create the organization because no group before it had been dedicated to the women's cause in the way they wanted. Some women's groups took care of basic women's survival issues, especially in rural areas, but there was still much work to be done. The following quote<sup>2</sup> from Marie Angélique Savané, one of the founders and the figurehead of *Yewwu-Yewwi*, reflects the quasi-revolutionary spirit that could be found among its members at the time:

*With Yewwu-Yewwi, we said from the beginning that we could undertake projects, but this wasn't our focus. What we wanted to do was to be an influential movement. That is, even if we undertook projects, they were projects to raise awareness in people. Conferences, talks, numerous discussions to bring people to a point of understanding. Secondly, we could support the activities of certain women's NGOs, certain economic interest groups, certain popular associations. But we, we believed that there were enough people doing that and we wanted to do something else. (masters' interview)*

*Yewwu-Yewwi* was thus able to respond, at a given moment, to the aspiration of a certain female intellectual elite that could not be found in the associative organizations of the time. Their objectives went further than simply taking care of material problems of survival and included, for example, salary equity between men and women, the eradication of polygamy, equal legal rights, the advancement of women in terms of political representation, control of their own bodies - a whole range of issues touching on the structure of gender relations in Senegalese society. Due to its privileged orientation, only a fairly limited audience was capable of adequately understanding this discourse, which explains to a certain extent why *Yewwu-Yewwi* was not able to mobilize beyond the confines of the intellectual milieu.

*Yewwu-Yewwi* was born of a coalition created by women who felt they were oppressed but who possessed a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), a certain amount of experience in the struggle to defend women's rights and an elevated

2 Citations in italics refer to interviews conducted in Dakar, under the auspices of masters' research, with people (the vast majority women) who played an important role of some sort in *Yewwu-Yewwi*.

sense of leadership.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the members of *Yewwu-Yewwi* have their political origins in the leftist political party *And-Jéf* which served as a political engagement training ground for an entire generation of Senegalese people.

### Objectives and activities of *Yewwu-Yewwi*

*Yewwu-Yewwi* adopted a number of objectives it considered important with regard to the social situation of women in Senegal. The most important, as summarized by the association's publication, are as follows:

- taking charge of and putting into practice the rightful aspirations of women, no matter their social status;
  - elevating the level of awareness and the reinforcement of women's political and social engagement;
  - the comprehension of the oppressive mechanism that victimizes women;
  - the development of a new feminist consciousness founded on resistance and struggle against all ideologies that oppress women;
  - the struggle against forms of female oppression in private life as in public life;
  - demanding the application of women's rights (the rights to work and to earn a decent salary, to equal pay for equal work, to education, to health, to control of their own bodies especially with regard to contraception and abortion, etc.);
  - the promotion of women's participation in political, economic, social and cultural processes and institutions;
  - the introduction of a feminist component into all economic and social development projects;
  - exercising equal parental rights over the child;
  - the initiation of socioeconomic projects to help women reinforce their autonomy;
  - solidarity between members of the association and Senegalese women (both within and outside the country), victims of exploitation and oppression, and with the oppressed women of the world, especially those that are victims of apartheid (Fippu, 1987, p. 7).
- Yewwu-Yewwi* organized various activities, the most significant of which were:
- awareness-raising activities: seminars, roundtables, training workshops, meetings.<sup>4</sup>
  - mobilization activities: *Yewwu-Yewwi* could easily draw several hundreds of people to its mobilization activities. For instance, it successfully organized and mobilized people around the important issue of violence against women and to promote peace in

3 This leadership is exemplified by the figure of Marie-Angélique Savané. In effect, in addition to having been one of the primary instigators of feminist theory in Senegal through *Yewwu-Yewwi*, she also participated in the creation of the pan-African and international feminist movements.

4 For example, the following themes were addressed: "Women and cultures in crisis: what alternatives for African women?", "Religion and the status of women", "The future of feminism in Africa", "Women and political power in Africa: the example of Senegal", "Images of women, women in images", "Women and economy".

Casamance, in the south of Senegal, where there was a civil war.

- lobbying activities: the association organized petition campaigns to recognize March 8 as International Women's Day in Senegal. In addition, intensive disobedience campaigns engaged the judicial system with regard to legislation governing the status of women in the public and private spheres. Polygamy was subject to important public debate that revealed strong conservative resistance at work within the State and from religious authorities.

- strategic activities: *Yewwu-Yewwi* introduced certain innovations through, for instance, granting prizes to public figures and organizations that were noteworthy in their promotion of women. The attribution of the Aline Sitoé Diatta prize<sup>5</sup> to the president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, was clearly a strategy to force the Senegalese executive to prove its leadership in improving the status of women in Senegal.

- publishing activities: the association put in place a publishing strategy in the form of contributions to newspapers, the circulation of activity summaries, and most importantly the creation of its own publication, *Fippu* which allowed it to debate subjects that were important to the feminist cause. The journal also contained a section dedicated to literary criticism, undertaken from a feminist perspective.

- international activities: *Yewwu-Yewwi* conducted international activities in the form of meetings with other African women's associations, fund-raising activities for women living under the apartheid regime, or the participation of certain members in international conferences.

- fund-raising activities: the funding of the association was assured by membership fees. Through art and bazaar activities organized in commemoration of March 8, they generated funding to ensure the day-to-day functioning of the association. For important events, they approached large Senegalese companies for sponsorships.

### Assets and victories of *Yewwu-Yewwi*

*Yewwu-Yewwi* engaged in intense lobbying activities to ensure that the interests of women are taken into account at all levels. The association played a watchdog role in sounding the alarm each time a delicate situation presented itself. It also played an important role in denouncing and raising awareness to violence against women (physical violence, female circumcision, etc.). One important victory was the important role it played in the revision of Senegalese family law code. Through its presence and its active participation in debates and by making concrete progressive proposals, *Yewwu-Yewwi* was able to influence the course of events.

<sup>5</sup> Aline Sitoé Diatta (1920-1944) was the figurehead of the Casamance resistance movement against French colonial domination.

Long awaited among integrationists and women's organizations, the reform of the Family Law Code has finally taken place. Not to accentuate, as we had feared, the injustices and discrimination of which women are victims, but instead to reinforce and broaden the rights of women, thus provoking agitation and discontent in certain men, Islamists above all. The reasons for this agitation or discontent are the modifications to Article 154 which remove the possibility of the husband to oppose the ability of the wife to take up a profession, Article 13 which now domiciles the woman in her primary place of residence and designates her professional activity as occurring in the place where it is conducted, Article 371 which recognizes the full civil capacity of the married woman, and finally Article 142 which gives the woman who was married as a child bride the possibility of annulling her marriage once she has given birth. (...) Surely, an important step has been taken with the adoption of the project of law modifying the Family Law Code. However, this victory, to appropriate the words of the Code's critics, is not only a victory for the feminists of *Yewwu-Yewwi* PLF who undertook initiatives to defend and improve the Code and actively participated in the seminar organized by the ASERJ to review the Code and to formulate proposed modifications. This is a victory for all women (Fippu 2, 1989, p. 10).

The fact that *Yewwu-Yewwi* did not rely on international funding for its core activities was a substantial asset for the organization that guaranteed, to a certain point, its autonomy and independence. This was a distinctive difference between this organization and those that followed. Effectively, the majority of organizations believe that they must have stable funding in order to dedicate themselves to a cause. Fatou Sarr explains that in the current context: "(e)ven when they believe that their work in a certain domain is necessary, women abandon it when it is not taken up by funders" (Sarr, 2007, p. 40).

### *Yewwu-Yewwi* and the women's associative movement: choosing leadership to the detriment of broad appeal

Among the primary objectives of *Yewwu-Yewwi* was accounting for the aspirations of all Senegalese women, whether they be rural women, labourers or prostitutes. However,

while all of these categories of women have been accounted for at a discursive level, this is far from the case at the practical level. In fact, the majority of awareness activities took place in urban areas while very few were deployed in rural zones. Today, only intellectual women of a certain age group still remember *Yewwu-Yewwi* as the intellectual discourse of the association during its high point never really found appeal beyond itself.

Even if *Yewwu-Yewwi*'s record is rather mixed in some areas (improvement of women's economic conditions or control over their own bodies), the important watchdog role that the organization invented and played should be recognized, especially with regard to its lobbying work. These were crucial steps for improving, among other things, the Family Law Code and social awareness of violence against women. Indeed, when *Yewwu-Yewwi* saw fit to approach common women to explain their ideology and their activities, the latter were generally interested in the association's work. After all, it wasn't for nothing that *Yewwu-Yewwi* was able to bring together a veritable social movement of women from all walks of life. That said, levelling the critique of elitism against the organization would be unjust given the nature of the movement, the limited number of members and their modest financial means. This was an association of intellectual women whose primary goal was to elevate the public level of awareness and to mediatize their positions on important questions concerning women in Senegalese society. From this perspective, their goal has been attained. At the same time, taking into consideration the systemic constraints that limited their action and the socially conservative milieu within which they operated permits for more nuanced criticisms that have been addressed, notably the relative absence of a synergy among actors concerned with the status of women in Senegal. The goal was to establish contact with these women's associations, not to merge with them.

*Yewwu-Yewwi* attempted to establish contact with other women's associations, primarily through awareness-raising conferences on the question of women in the suburbs of Dakar.

*I attended a conference where Doctor Wane came as a representative of Yewwu-Yewwi, she came to give a presentation in Pikine, in Wolof, where the women were down there, who were women in the markets, in the neighbourhoods, and then... They said to her: "but you, what you're saying here interests us. You need to create things like this to explain to us, so that we can create the same movement. You must come back often. (masters' interview)*

The leadership role played by *Yewwu-Yewwi* can be explained by the fact that it was composed of a majority of very highly educated women. Even if this could have been considered a handicap from some perspectives, the level of education of the

organization's members still played a positive determining role. Rocher (1968 : 135) notes: "The elite includes people and groups which, due to the power they hold or the influence they exercise, contribute to the historic action of a collective by the decisions they take, through the ideas, sentiments or emotions that they express or symbolize". This definition most definitely applies to *Yewwu-Yewwi*.

It should be recognized that, through the actions they proposed, *Yewwu-Yewwi* helped give the current women's movement an action-based orientation. In several areas such as equality, violence against women and female circumcision, it was a trailblazer, and not only at the level of theorization and raising awareness. The vital contribution of *Yewwu-Yewwi* can also be measured by the fact that it has had an influence on associations that emerged later on to take up the struggle. From this perspective, the militant nature of *Yewwu-Yewwi* is something of a crucial step in the awakening of women to the role that they must play at both political and professional levels.

*Thanks to Yewwu-Yewwi, several women's associations, including political parties, have begun to organize conferences to say "yes, the woman should play her role and she should no longer content herself with the annual two-week women's rights campaign", "Women must have responsibilities". Women have entered into politics more since the 1980s, and subsequently we've seen the apparition of female union organizers who are working the streets. [...] I don't think it's only Yewwu-Yewwi, but also the progress of the democratic movement, the struggle for secularism, and the contribution of independent unions who were created around the same time. However, one must consider that since Yewwu-Yewwi, there has been greater female participation in sites of power. There has also been a greater integration of women into public and private administrative positions. There is also the fact that the men, I think that the crisis helped, also used their authority over women less. (masters' interview)*

In the relationships that *Yewwu-Yewwi* pursued with other women's associations, it seems to have adopted a sort of provider role, or an exaggerated sense of "maternalism". This appears quite strikingly in the words of one of the interview subjects: "our work as women intellectuals is to work with others, to guide them because nobody else will do it in our place. It is one of our responsibilities".

Beyond these considerations, which are completely justifiable given the profile and objectives of the association's members, *Yewwu-Yewwi* should be credited with having helped many other organizations come alive. The following quote, from the former president of the *Siggil Jigeen* network attests to this.

*Our organizations were born in the 1990s as young sympathizers of the association. The Siggil Jigeen network was born of the loins of Yewwu-Yewwi. This must be recognized. Because the organizations that were started in the 1990s and that well understood the need to take control of practical as well as strategic interests, by emphasizing demands like the access of women to decision-making, changing things significantly in order to improve the status of Senegalese women, we were greatly influenced by Yewwu-Yewwi. For example, there was the collective of women for the defence of the family (the COFDEF) which I had the honour of directing since its founding in '93, and other organizations like the legal information clinic and the RADI which is an old organization that worked on practical issues. Without forgetting that the leaders, who really controlled the opinions of these organizations, I won't say all, but the majority, came out of Yewwu-Yewwi with a clear understanding of what Senegalese society needs. (masters' interview)*

Given these considerations, one could say that *Yewwu-Yewwi* played a fundamental role in the sense that it considerably influenced the understanding of strategic interests by the women's associations that came after them. By taking it upon themselves to adopt what at the time were completely innovative propositions, and with all the difficulties that go along with such trail-blazing, its members succeeded in opening the way and laying the groundwork for the new generations of women's associations.

To a certain degree, the associations that have come after *Yewwu-Yewwi* have learned lessons from it. This was the case for the *Siggil Jigeen* network and its very direct relationship with *Yewwu-Yewwi*. It is evidence of a successful generational transmission in the women's struggle in Senegal. Thus, the transfer of responsibility was able to occur and the associations that took up the struggle anew were able to learn from the mistakes of their elders. The most edifying proof is the fact that while many opinion leaders admit the key role of *Yewwu-Yewwi* in the process of advancing women's demands, very few organizations have since identified themselves as feminist. This in spite of the fact that all of their positions and activities borrow from a strong feminist mindset, especially through their struggles for the promotion of the economic and social status of women, the advancement of female legal achievements and their battle for the introduction of parity in political representation. It is nevertheless important to note that, to a certain extent, the associations succeeding *Yewwu-Yewwi* have considered the "feminist" denomination to be a handicap to their cause. Even if they work towards the same objectives, they prefer to operate under a different banner to avoid the same sorts of resistance from conservative Senegalese society. In this way, these associations are strategic actors (Crozier and Friedberg, 2001) that adapt themselves to the situation at hand and invent new ways of influencing the normal rules of society by eliminating certain terms or replacing them with others better adapted to the sociopolitical context.

## Conclusion

This study of the emergence of *Yewwu-Yewwi* has allowed for a brief sketch of the primary associations that have contributed to the women's social movement in Senegal. While *Yewwu-Yewwi* was one of the few organizations that explicitly identified as feminist, it nonetheless came to have a structuring effect as no matter the various denominations that women's groups go by today, the ideal and the goal are effectively feminist. The ultimate goal of all of these organizations was and remains the full emergence of women, woman's incorporation into all levels of society, the improvement of women's legal status with respect to equality of the sexes, and even the broadening of these prerogatives. Yet contrary to other associations, the "feminist" component introduced by *Yewwu-Yewwi* can be considered as the most engaged of all in that, for the first time ever, women introduced concerns into the public space that were revolutionary for the era and for the country. Debate was proposed on contraception, polygamy, the political participation of women, violence against women and more. Consequently, the feminism advocated by *Yewwu-Yewwi* was considered to be an obstacle, to some extent, to obtaining certain objectives in a conservative society. Nevertheless, this allowed for the construction and justification of specific demands that would be discussed in public, thus permitting other groups to follow the path previously laid out through the defence of women's rights. The *Siggil Jigeen* network is a good example. This allows us to see that no matter its limits and imperfections, *Yewwu-Yewwi* had a fundamental influence on the demands of women in Senegal.

*Yewwu-Yewwi*, however, was not a popularly accessible organization nor did it seek to become one. While able to make itself heard and to carry out its activities, *Yewwu-Yewwi* was in reality a hardcore group that never focused on the objective of popularity. This can be understood in a certain sense because if the group had indeed been more broadly-based, it may have not been able to have the same quality of reflection and theoretical analysis that constituted its main strength, but was also its main point of criticism.

To some extent, the conservative nature of Senegalese society explains the challenges that *Yewwu-Yewwi* met along its journey and its mixed success on certain issues. In the face of resistance encountered by the self-identified feminist movement, this inheritance appears to bring with it certain lessons. This is how the current context should be understood whereby women's associations pursue what, after close examination, are the classic objectives of the feminist struggle, while simultaneously refusing the feminist label. Even if this strategy leads to a further advancement of the feminist cause without encountering the resistance that this label has met, these groups nevertheless expose themselves to the risk of investing themselves in projects related to the improvement of women's lives without actually changing the structures of gender relations nor raising the level of women's awareness at the national level. *Yewwu-Yewwi* fought hard against

the marginalization of women in that they put themselves forward as legitimate social actors, equal to men in every way. This allowed them to position themselves as one of the first associations founding the women's movement in Senegal and in Africa.

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