

Breaking the silence on gendered sanitation taboos across urban Africa

Adriana Allen [University College London] *

ABSTRACT: Despite the commitment expressed by African leaders through the 2015 Ngor Declaration, to achieve universal access to adequate and sustainable sanitation and hygiene services, and eliminate open defecation by 2030-later endorsed by the international community as part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6-the sanitation 'crisis' is far from vanishing in African cities. In their rich historical interrogation of the global sanitation crisis, Black and Fawcett (2008) frame this crisis as a 'taboo', an unspoken subject across almost every culture. We talk, plan, and manage cities and urban life as if faeces and urine were not part of them. Building upon this framing, we argue that rather than approaching the sanitation crisis as a site marked by a lack of facilities, infrastructure, technologies, and investments, the real question lies in understanding why urban sanitation has been historically relegated to a 'taboo'; an unpleasant topic rarely tackled in its own right and complexity and pushed aside in favour of clean water, water-based sewage systems and water-intensive hygiene practices.

Drawing from a three-year action-research project entitled [OVERDUE: Tackling the sanitation taboo across urban Africa](#), we argue that sanitation taboos are deeply gendered, and dive into an exploration of how they are reinforced or challenged through social norms, community and municipal by-laws. Framed from a feminist political ecology perspective, the discussion takes us to the experiences of women and girls across the cities of Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Antananarivo (Madagascar), Beira (Mozambique), Bukavu (DRC), Freetown (Sierra Leone) Mwanza (Tanzania), and St Louis (Senegal).

CV:

Prof Allen leads the OVERDUE project at UCL The Bartlett Development Planning Unit. She has over 30 years of international research experience in more than 25 countries across the Global South. Adopting a feminist political ecology perspective, her work looks at the gendered interface between everyday city-making practices and planned interventions and their capacity to generate transformative social and environmental relations. Her most recent books include: [Untamed Urbanisms](#) (2015), [Environmental Justice and Resilience in the Global South](#) (2017) and [Urban Water Trajectories](#) (2017) [Handbook of Urban Global Health](#) (2019) and [Routledge Handbook of Urban Resilience](#) (2020).

* On behalf of the OVERDUE team, The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London (UCL)

E-mail: a.allen@ucl.ac.uk