# CHAPTER 2

## Bodies, practices and things: tackling the sanitation taboo across urban Africa

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### Introduction

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 to eliminate open defecation by 2030 – later endorsed by the international community as part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 – the so-called "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. In other words, we talk, plan and manage cities and urban life as if faeces and urine were not part of them. Here I set out to explore why urban sanitation continues to be relegated to a "taboo" across urban Africa; 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. This tendency denotes a Western-centric approach, in which the region's urbanisation, analysis of its problems, and the search for "solutions" are predominantly portrayed as a deviation from desirable patterns. In the case of sanitation – but also of other basic services – this manifests through the relegation of off-grid or on-site systems as provisional, precarious, unsafe and largely unmodern. Seen at best as the coping mechanism adopted by the urban poor, off-grid sanitation is rarely examined in its own right as a system that supports the sanitation needs of African cities at large.

**Fig. 1**: Living off-grid, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Photo: A. Allen.*

While relying on off-grid sanitation is not necessarily a synonym of sanitation precarity, in reality, modernist perspectives that render off-grid systems as a transitory step into the grid city to come neglect these systems and the bodies, practices and things that made them work, and in the process reinforce their precarity. In short, while off-grid sanitation is irrefutably part of the African post-colonial city, it continues to be invisibilised, instinctively avoided, systematically untackled, or at best reduced to a "cultural, technical or financial problem", prejudicing poor women and girls in particular but also others.

In this chapter I set out to peel off, layer after layer, the multiple and deeply gendered taboos that produce and reproduce sanitation injustices across African cities. In doing so, I define the **sanitation taboo**, not just as a set of social and cultural norms regulating the flow and management of bodily fluids – basically poo, wee and blood – but also by extending our gaze to the institutional practices that reinforce processes of discrimination, oppression and marginalisation upon those who do not simply rely on off-grid sanitation systems but who actively keep those systems working across the whole sanitation service chain.

The analysis draws on an action-research project that I led between 2020 and 2023 called: *OVERDUE: Tackling the sanitation taboo across urban Africa*.[1] The project initially brought together an extraordinary team of academic and non-academic organisations working closely with grassroots organisations in the cities of Freetown (Sierra Leone), Beira (Mozambique) and Mwanza (Tanzania), all with long trajectories of advancing sanitation for the urban poor. Soon after, we were joined by four feminist organisations from Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Saint Louis (Senegal), Antananarivo in Madagascar and Bukavu (DRC).

The purpose of OVERDUE was threefold: First, to **reframe sanitation** across urban Africa from a feminist perspective, by unpacking the historical and colonial narratives that underpin the sanitation taboo. That is, to enable a 360-degree perspective on **what "equitable urban sanitation" means** (what matters, to whom, why), including an in-depth exploration of what sanitation infrastructures *promise* to do and what they *actually deliver* across different colonial legacies and postcolonial conditions. Second, to produce actionable knowledge based on a re-evaluation of gendered sanitation **experiences**, **practices**, and **investments** across the continuum between large-scale infrastructural investments to expand grid systems and the incremental practices and investments made by the urban poor collectively and individually to produce off-grid sanitation facilities and services. And third, to take stock of ongoing experimentation towards just sanitation and to **foster regional dialogue and exchange,** by engaging with the women and men, girls and boys who build, use, run, and maintain off-grid sanitation systems, in order to generate both insights and change, bridging experiences across geographies, scales and key actors and institutions.

The chapter draws specifically on the multiple insights provided by women and girls, men and boys on the ground across the seven cities through in-depth interviews and the shadowing of paid and unpaid sanitation workers. Their experiences were documented in over 70 videos, which are available on the OVERDUE website with subtitles in English and French.

In the following sections, I present the analytical framing adopted and then explore three typically overlooked dimensions across the many disciplines and professions that aim – explicitly or implicitly – to address sanitation injustices: **bodies**, **practices** and **things**.

## Framing

Over the years, many scholars have documented how the negative impacts of infrastructure investments are disproportionately borne by women, the poor and racial minorities (Burgos and Pulido, 1998; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008; Young and Keil, 2010; Bakker, 2012; among others). In this chapter I set out to explore the multiple ways in which unequal gender dynamics operate in

intersection with class, race, ethnicity, religion and age through the everyday production and use of sanitation services. In doing so, I aim to bring to the fore other possibilities for understanding and acting upon off-grid sanitation systems across urban Africa.

Back in 2004, AbdouMaliq Simone put forward the notion of "people as infrastructure", which he defines as the "endless, flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of people that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used… intersections that, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices." (Simone, 2004: 407). Focusing on Johannesburg, he invites the reader to see what lies beyond yet another example of "ruined urbanization, [and of] the ruining of Africa by urbanization… [to see that] in these ruins, something else besides decay might be happening." (*ibid.*) Here I expand Simone's definition from a more explicit feminist perspective, by exploring how bodies, practices and things reclaim the perceived "ruined city" and intersect on a daily basis to reveal why sanitation injustices and the very possibility of sanitation justice are simultaneously delineated across gender, class, race, ethnicity and age.

Adopting a feminist perspective is a critical step in decolonising the ways in which African cities are perceived, conceived and lived. As argued by Mohanty (2007) in *Under Western Eyes*, "[h]owever sophisticated or problematical its use as an explanatory construct, colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression – often violent – of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question." (p. 334). Fighting against the essentialised construction of the "Third-World-Woman", she calls us to reflect critically on "[t]he relationship between 'Woman' – a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) – and 'women-real', material subjects of their collective histories – [as] one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address." (*ibid.*)

As a Latin American feminist activist and scholar, coming from a working class background and based for a long period in a global North institution that nevertheless seeks to decentre and co-produce actionable knowledge beyond Western paradigms, I set out in this chapter to embrace Mohany's challenge, by critically excavating the difference between essentialised identities and real people (women, girls, men and boys), whose bodies and practices and daily engagement with the material world of things constitute the off-grid sanitation systems that sustain African cities.

In engaging with **bodies**, **practices**, and **things**, I position my enquiry within the field of feminist political ecology (FPE) in light of three key considerations.

First, FPE offers valuable insights to understand how intersectional patriarchal biases shape sanitation accessibility, planning, and inclusivity from design to location, resulting in unequal access to and control over for women (and other political subjects), which in turn impacts their dignity (Mollett & Faria, 2013). In a seminal piece, Rocheleau *et al* (1996) raise the case for FPE to frame a critique of international development thought and practice, arguing that gender is "a critical variable in shaping resource access and control interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change" (p. 4). Over time, many FPE scholars have examined how urban struggles unfurl throughout engendered body politics and everyday practices (Jarosz, 2000; Elmhirst, 2011; and Truelove, 2011; among others). Yet, I agree with Mollet and Faria (2013) in their critique of the need for FPE to embrace a "messier" notion of gender that accounts for its interplay with other processes of racial, ethnic, class and religious segregation and exclusion. In other words, the need to re-problematise and challenge the understanding of gender "as shorthand for other differences" (p. 119). As argued by Crenshaw (1997), "treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently" (p. 285).

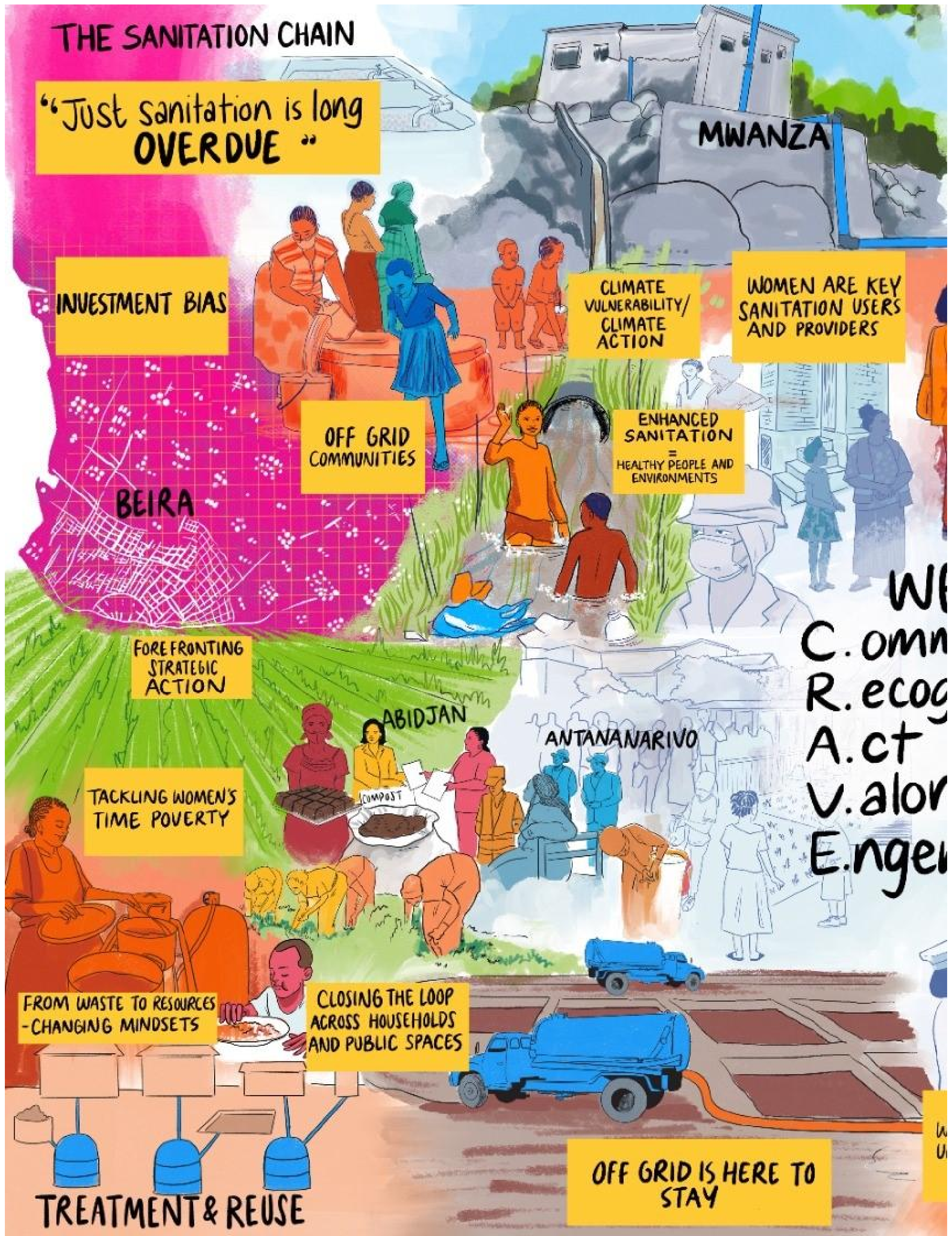


**Fig. 2**: OVERDUE - Engendering the full sanitation service chain. Image: A. Jusic. Poster designed: N. Coetze.*

ACCESS & CONSTRUCTION
THE RIGHT TO SANITATION FOR ALL FORMS OF TENURE
INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE FINANCING MECHANISMS
BUKAVU
FREETOWN
GENDER RESPONSIVE DESIGN
POOLITICS
TACKLING THE SANITATION TABOO "Tradition is not a prison"
SAINT-LOUIS
Formal Informal
♂ SANITATION WORKERS ♀
Paid Unpaid
ENHANCING THE VOICES WE HARDLY HEAR FROM
GENDER BIAS - WOMEN CARRY THE UNPAID SANITATION WORK BURDEN
STORAGE & DISTRIBUTION

Moreover, relegating the acknowledgement of difference to a context or culturally-specific matter reduces the room available to engage with the production and reproduction of inequality. The politics of place plays of course a key role in situating different forms of oppression, discrimination, and marginalisation, but the critical question is why and how "difference" continues to be conflated with the production and reproduction of inequality and injustice, a theme that still calls for deeper interrogation in research and debates about sanitation across the global South. As emphasised by Castán Broto and Alves (2018) in reference to Bastia's work (2014), "intersectionality theory defies the compartmentalized approach to 'difference' that permeates debates on identity politics: it is a means to claim multiple sources of oppression that affect vulnerable communities and which are not always represented in feminist analyses of urban inequality" (pp. 2-3). This requires engaging with the lived experiences of sanitation services use and production beyond complex sets of categories and data. Furthermore, as contended by Sultana (2020), a FPE approach enables us to understand how conditions described as "environmental degradation" and "resource crises" can elicit diverse sentiments or feelings that affect the ways in which resources are envisioned, accessed, utilised, governed, and controlled on a daily basis. Throughout the following sections, I pay attention to the feelings underpinning the everyday engagement of those whose bodies and practices make and sustain off-grid sanitation systems across African cities.

Second, and returning to a critical point raised by Rocheleau *et al* (1996), while it is crucial to understand that access to sanitation facilities refers not just to the physical presence of toilets, but to how well they serve their intended purposes and meet the requirements of their users, it is also imperative to shift our gaze from the question of access, to that of **control over**. In other words, control exists beyond access, as it encompasses not just the availability and use of sanitation facilities but the power to decide on their planning, operation, maintenance, administration, and governance. As argued by Sundberg (2016), looking at the everyday intimate and embodied practices of women and girls within domestic micro-politics remains essential, as it is at the scale of the everyday that social reproduction occurs. Yet, I propose that we need to expand our gaze to other embodied practices and scales, by looking at the wide range of sanitation workers (paid and unpaid) that sustain social reproduction across neighbourhood and city-wide off-grid systems; thus acknowledging a wider set of subject identities and social and spatial orders to be explored, understood, acknowledged, and challenged in the process of advancing just sanitation.

Third, unlike other strands of feminist scholarship, FPE engages explicitly with the link between the political and the material world. In this chapter, I call for a different way of looking at the material world as those **things** that actually co-constitute the building, running and maintenance of off-grid sanitation systems while yet remaining invisible. Challenging the bias towards certain things – typically grid infrastructural systems – across colonial and contemporary sanitation trajectories, helps to understand how and why spatial and social sanitary segregation continues to be the norm across African cities. This is exemplified in the excellent analysis of Maputo's sanitation trajectory between 1887 and 2017 by Biza *et al* (2022), in which they show how the sanitary governmentality that established a sharp separation between ("un-deserving") bodies and places during the Portuguese colonial rule, still persists today. During this period, "[p]rojects of drainage and land reclamation created clean, dry and sanitary habitats for the privileged white few, the existence of which simultaneously created the wet, unhealthy and muddy spaces deemed good enough for the non-white majority" (*ibid.*, p. 606). The Maputo 2017 Sanitation and Drainage Master Plan reinforces this sanitary segregation project by focusing infrastructural improvements and investments on those areas served by the centralised sewerage network, where only 10% of the city's population live. With variations in the percentage of what is included and excluded through investment flows into sanitation, for whom and where, all the seven cities where we worked in the OVERDUE project, show similar trajectories.

Last but not least, I pursue throughout this chapter a different way of "seeing" African cities through sanitation. In the following sections I extend the call by McFarlane and Silver (2017) to "seeing sanitation" as a means to repoliticise urban life to that of "wording sanitation". Focusing on Cape Town's *poolitics* struggles and on how the apartheid legacy of racialised segregation plays out in the post-apartheid era, they seek seeing sanitation beyond a service delivery problem, to instead unveil the plurality of often contested notions of sanitation at work. In short, as a means to "enter into the politics of both sanitation (poolitics) and the city itself" (*ibid*., p. 129).

While engaging with the everyday poolitics embedded in bodies, practices, and things across the seven African cities where we worked, I pay particular attention to the everyday terms and expressions through which ordinary citizens talk about shit, pee, and menstrual blood, exploring the feelings, experiences and aspirations that they encompass. Doing so is critical because of the dis-juncture between the terminology used by the State, utilities, and donors across policy documents, master plans and regulations, and everyday poolitical verbal language and expressions. This dis-juncture is highly problematic because language remains a site of silencing, of exclusion, and of invisibility. As contended by Parnell and Pieterse (2010:153) "you need to be 'seen by the state' before benefiting from it". I argue here that bringing to the fore the everyday wording of sanitation across local languages is essential to generate more inclusive ways of being seen **and heard**, and ultimately to tackle the sanitation taboo across urban Africa.

One of the aims of OVERDUE was to interrogate the persistence of the colonial sanitation legacy across urban Africa. While diving into the everyday wording of sanitation was not part of the initial plan, it became a necessity to challenge the hegemonic language used to fix the sanitation crisis in the cities where we worked. Furthermore, throughout the project, language emerged as a crucial issue, revealing first and foremost the taboos and stereotypes associated with sanitation and sanitation work. There is an abundance of euphemistic expressions, local slang and body language to refer to "latrines" or "human waste", through which power over bodies and practices is exercised. Interrogating the "way to say it" led us to the production of two "glossaries", which unlike other glossaries on sanitation did not aim to explain technical terms, but rather to put into a practice a feminist decolonial approach. The first one was collectively produced by the 55 African activists and practitioners who participated in a co-learning space on just sanitation held along the month of July 2023. Termed as a "political activist glossary", the outcome includes sanitation terms in Swahili, Wolof, Krio, French, Portuguese and English, and the contributors' reflections on how each term is used, by whom, where, and with which connotation (OVERDUE, 2023).

The second glossary was an initiative by the OVERDUE team in Saint Louis (Senegal), led by the Observatoire Genre et Développement (OGDS) of Saint Louis, under the direction of Ndeye Penda Diouf, in collaboration with Professor Sambou and his students at the Université Gaston Berger Saint Louis. The team carried out fieldwork and documentary analysis that led to 23 Wolof terms related to sanitation, deciphering issues of gender equality, inequality, norms and values at the heart of the OVERDUE project (Sambou *et al*, 2023). In Senegal, Wolof is by far the most widely spoken vernacular language. The vast majority of the six linguistic and cultural groups (Peulh, Bambara, Serere, Diola, etc.) speak and understand Wolof, while the media – regional and national – and social networks alternate between Wolof and French. Teaching and the written press are predominantly in French, and oral debates in decision-making bodies (parliament, municipal councils, etc.) alternate between French and Wolof; laws, public policies and development plans are written entirely in French. This seriously limits ordinary citizens' access to information about public policies and programmes, particularly by women and girls, who account for 60 percent of the Senegalese illiterate population and who rely mostly on oral communication. Thus, taking into account linguistic practices, issues of polysemy, gestures and local intonation, this glossary aimed to promote more inclusive and decolonising modes of communication.

**Fig. 3**: Discussing the meaning of sanitation-related terms across local African languages. Photo: A. Allen.*

**Bodies**

> *In African culture there are many taboos.*
>
> *When a woman is in the toilet, we say that we shouldn't hear any noises of what she's doing in the bathroom. When she pees, you shouldn't hear. If she releases a digestive gas, it must not be audible. When she comes out of the toilet, you shouldn't smell anything*. (AK, Abidjan, July 2021 at GEPALEF / OVERDUE, 2021)

Talking about poo and pooing is uncomfortable across all cultures, but particularly uncomfortable and problematic when it comes to women and girls. In this section, I explore how their bodies intersect the production of sanitation, not just as biological systems but fundamentally as social and political bodies. A focus on bodies enables engaging with various forms of difference, how they are produced and experienced. As argued by Truelove and Ruszczyk (2022), "[c]onceptualizing bodies as infrastructure reveals important and intimate dimensions of the everyday politics and social and material forms that enable critical resources to flow and integral networks to be built in cities" (p. 2).

In dealing with their bodily fluids and those of others, most women and girls across urban Africa encounter all forms of violence on a daily basis. I am talking about other forms of violence than those typically recognised in the field of sanitation, not just the violence of lacking access to improved facilities or adequate sanitation, the violence of being forced to defecate in the open if you lack the means to pay for a toilet as you go, or the violence of facing sexual harassment or even rape in the act of releasing yourself. I am talking about the violences and injustices produced and reproduced through the socially constructed norms or taboos paradoxically enforced to protect their bodies.

One feeling encapsulated in the quote at the beginning of this section, as well as running across the testimonies shared by other women on the ground across the seven cities, is

**Fig. 4**: Stepping into a public toilet block in Freetown. Photo: N. Leblond.*

that of women's bodies being "disgusting". Control over women's bodily fluids extends to the disgust they face, if they make noise or produce smell, as they release themselves, or give away their nakedness while being at the toilet. A woman from Abidjan shares a further story about how women's bodies are controlled:

> *We tend to say when a lady is in the bathroom that she should not speak because if she talks to an outside man it's no good, it is as if she was cheating on her husband with him. Others also tend to religion to say no, it is not good. It's like we see your nakedness. Being in the toilet and then you talk to someone outside, it's like you're naked I don't know, there's too much they say*. [FM, Abidjan, July 2021]

In the simple and everyday act of releasing themselves, women's bodies are branded as "dirty", "disgusting" and "cheating" bodies to be controlled and regulated at all costs, without the chance to escape social scrutiny even in the privacy of a toilet. Women's bodies are not only offensive because of the gases, noises, and smell they produce when they pee and poo, but also because they menstruate. Menstruation is one of the sites where control is routinely exercised, ruling the separation and isolation of menstruating bodies from others, even those in the most inner circles. The quotes below from women interviewed in Abidjan and Beira, as well as a team member based in Maputo, explain some of the taboos enforced during menstruation and their impact on women's physical and psychological well-being:

> *Sometimes our husbands when they do their fetishes,* [say] *when you have your periods, you must not come near them. They must not see the blood, they even refuse to eat their wives' food, they don't sleep in the same bed with their wives* [women have to sleep on the floor]. [They say] *it's their fetishes that demand that. With us Muslims, you must not touch your husband, he tells you're dirty. You can't touch the kettle, you can't put the water in the kettle, it's another person who doesn't have her period who can put water in the kettle and put it in the shower. You can't touch the prayer mat either.* [FT Abidjan, June 2021]

> *Periods are seen as dirty, so* [what] *we're going to tell the little girl? That she must wash herself, she must change clothes, not for the sake of menstrual hygiene but because she is told she is dirty and that impurity is coming out. Still today in 2021, there are some areas where the young girl can't touch anything when she has her period. They can't access certain foods, or certain spaces, and endure reduced mobility when menstruating*. [AM Beira, March 2022]

> [When girls menstruate while at school], *some get dirty and they are the laughing stock of others, boys especially who say "ah she got dirty" and they mock her. You see that the next day the girl may not come to school. We are faced with the drop-out of so many girls, only because of these toilet situations* [lack of school toilets, lack of bins to dispose of sanitary towels, or poorly maintained facilities for both girls and boys, where boys have priority of use]. [BT Abidjan, June 2021]

> *When it comes to menstrual pain, you are told, you are now a woman but to be a real African woman, you have to endure the pain. You shouldn't even talk about your pain. If the cramps are not treated early enough, they can evolve to an advanced stage to the point of preventing the woman from having children.* [CSM, OVERDUE team oral reflections, Maputo, July 2022]

Although menstruation can be considered a biological fact, it needs to be approached as a social and political matter, as a site of control over the bodies of women and girls. Social expectations reinforce the idea that women and girls have a responsibility to reproduce, but their bodies when menstruating should be invisible. Building upon Houppert's (1999) way of describing the taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation as the "culture of concealment", Wood (2020: 319) argues that "women's vigilance about menstrual concealment is not freely chosen, but a required self-disciplinary practice rooted in menstrual discourse that characterizes menstruation as stigmatized, taboo, and therefore shrouded in secrecy. The concealment imperative is a form of social control and a body project that keeps women disembodied and objectified."

Whether when menstruating, pooing or weeing, women's and girls' bodies are subjected to an endless list of disciplinary actions not just enforced by others but also by themselves. Among others, Hazare and Tholiya (2023) document the extent to which women living in "slums" are forced to self-discipline their bodies by restricting their food and drink intake to visit the toilet less frequently or to avoid the shame and stigma of releasing themselves in the open. These practices in turn lead the prevalence of urinary tract infections, chronic constipation, worsened menstrual and pregnancy symptoms and increased rates of maternal mortality among other hardships they face.

Whether by self-disciplining themselves to avoid social and cultural sanctions, or by being disciplined by others, sanitation systems across African cities largely rely on the active policing of women's bodies but also on their unpaid labour. As put by one of the women interviewed in Abidjan, when it comes to the use and maintenance of toilets, women are "in the oven and in the mill" – in French *être au four et au moulin* – meaning that they can't cut themselves in half to be in two places at once.

> *In shared courtyards, we tend to say that men must pass before women have access to the toilet, and also after the passage of women, when men want to go into the toilet they say that the toilet dirty, it's not clean because a woman came before them. Everywhere, in common yards, in cities, everywhere, there are so many inequalities between men and women. When we need to have access to the toilet, men have priority. When it comes to cleaning it's the women. Even at the level of the economy, the service in sanitation… the emptiers are the men. They say it's messy for women but in reality it's because they want to confine us in what doesn't make money.* [KS Abidjan, June 2021]

Many women living in low-income settlements find that even if their households have an on-site sanitation facility, their bodily needs are not a priority – they can only use it after men have met their needs. For them, and the many that do not even have access to an on-site facility, the options are to either pay to use a public or communal facility or release themselves in the open. As put by a woman living in one of Beira's periphery settlements: *if you can't pay – you can't poo!* [FGD Beira, March 2022]. In addition to the well-documented health and time burdens and risks that this imposes on their bodies, this reveals a double-burden embedded in the care economy. Women are expected to support

the bodily needs of others on an unpaid basis, yet they are forced to pay to go to the toilet. The key difference between grid and off-grid systems is that the latter involve a much larger number of people and practices to clean, maintain and repair toilets, and to manually remove, transport and dispose wastewater and sludge. The majority of these jobs fall onto women and girls as a duty, as part of the large economy of care and reproductive work. Thus, women's invisibility extends from their bodies to their unpaid labour, which in reality is what sustains off-grid systems. As put by the OVERDUE team leader in Saint Louis:

> *The general, visible, observation is that it is men who work in the sanitation sector. Because we mainly focus on paid jobs, valued trades, such as waste collectors, carters, engineers, etc. However, it is in the houses that the work of sanitation begins. Because it is within houses that the management of toilets, excrements, wastewater, and so on is performed. In reality, women labour a lot, accomplishing a lot of sanitation work in the houses and also in the neighborhoods. And they also suffer a lot from sanitation-related problems. … from morning to evening, women in fact work in sanitation. It is a job they do silently, that they accept to do as their duty. But, they do so under extremely precarious conditions, extremely difficult conditions and it has repercussions on their minds.*
>
> *They don't even have time to go and do paid work, sometimes it's problematic for them to manage all of that. On the mental level, on the material level, on the physical level, on the financial level. It's really hard on women. There are houses where the mother pays for the disposal of these waters if she does not have a daughter who can help her or else it is the young girl who carries the bucket on her head to dispose of it.* [PD, OGDS, oral OVERDUE team reflections, Saint Louis, July 2023]

Several feminist scholars have challenged the "stubbornly gendered" political economy of care work (Himmelweit and Plomien, 2014). For Parker *et al*. (2023: 557) "the burdens of caring work, especially when tied to a lack of mobility and unsupportive infrastructures, can be a form of *slow infrastructural violence." ….*[which] *"*is part of a broader patriarchal, classed, and raced structure in which certain activities (caregiving) are devalued and demeaned, as are certain bodies, in relational and reinforcing, but not always co-determined ways" (*ibid*. p. 558). Slow infrastructural violence operates on the basis of making female bodies and their labour invisible and imposes slowly accruing instead than visible and spectacular harm. As argued by Nixon (2011), its repetitive and unspoken impacts amount to a form of "delayed destruction" practice upon the bodies of women and girls.

As mentioned before, when enforced upon isolated bodies, the aforementioned forms of slow violence produce emotional experiences of stress, fear, stigma and humiliation, but when realised as collective experiences, these feelings turned into shared sense of frustration and injustice, what González-Hildago and Zagrafos (2020) refer to as the "collective emotions" with the potential to motivate collective action.

As we interacted with women in the field, we pursued the power of conscientisation aiming to trigger such a process by breaking the feeling that what is happening to their bodies is an isolated experience. The journey from the individual to the collective experience is critical to resist and contest all forms of domination and violence, not just those that are recognised by others, such as sexual harassment and rape. In short, this marks the difference between the journey from others defining and controlling our bodies to us doing so. One key insight from this observation, is that it is not just the diversity of practical sanitation needs of users that matters. While women are systematically seen at best as infrastructure users, they actually produce – build, repair, run and maintain – sanitation. Furthermore, for them, a toilet is not just a place to wee and poo, but one of the few places where they can find privacy and intimacy, a place to look at yourself in a mirror, a place to care for yourself. In other words, what matters is not what infrastructures are but what they do or don't do for people.

**Fig. 5**: The uprising of invisible women workers, Street Theatre by OGDS. Photo: P. Diouf*

**Practices**

> "*When we talk about sanitation, everyone* [the local government, utility, donors and sanitation NGOs] *talks about investments on building latrines, but nobody talks about the time after we finish building and we start to use, until desludging is needed. But we found that women are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the toilets, changing the children, teaching them how to use them, what to put or not inside the latrines.* […] *Women are key to maintaining, cleaning, educating, but people don't speak about this.*" [HD, oral OVERDUE team reflections, Beira November 2021]
>
> *… sometimes when* [people] *learn my trade, they look down on me and ask: "Why are you doing this job? It's disgusting!" But how would you manage if we weren't here? Who would empty your pits? Who would clean the toilets you use? More than once I have had nicknames like "Véronique poo-poo" In the end what I do it's a job like any other…* [Female public toilet cleaner, Antananarivo, July 2021]
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> *Emptying is still a taboo job in Madagascar because it consists of removing faeces from people's toilets, And it's hard work too because [of the] lack of means to buy 100% adapted equipment such as vacuum trucks to prevent those involved from touching faeces directly.* [Male manual emptier, Antananarivo, June 2021]

Let's now move to the site of practices. Throughout multiple field encounters with women and girls, we found that dealing with sanitation involves not only heavy and risky tasks and long hours but also a heavy mental workload which is typically overlooked. Unfortunately, in the development field, sanitation is not just typically approached as a sector – but as a deeply masculinised sector or set of practices, in which women are at best featured as users, whose practical needs should be considered. As argued in the previous section, the masking of their unpaid care work as duty is a social construction reproduced not just through social and cultural norms but through development interventions and health campaigns. Looking at their everyday practices and the language that defines them reveals another site of marginalisation and subordination that not only denies the physical, health and mental burden that sanitation represents for women and girls but also the essentialising nature of calling what they do day in and day out "care".

In Wolof the term *defar kër* (care) refers to a range of unpaid household tasks carried out by women on a daily basis, which includes keeping toilets and bathrooms clean (Sambou *et al*, 2023). Taken together, these activities constitute back-breaking work regularly carried out by women or delegated to girls, which generally receive little or no recognition from the men living in the household or from public authorities, as they fall under the definition of the care economy. In Senegalese culture – but also across other cities where we worked – keeping the house and any sanitation facility available in the household clean and in good order is almost the exclusive duty of women and girls. They comply with this social expectation for fear of being laughed at by their peers or stigmatised as "unclean". In doing so, they are expected to be cheerful and proud. A well-known Senegalese Wolof expression goes "*kër su baaxee jigéen la*" – literally: "If the house is good, it's thanks to the woman" (*ibid.*). This popular belief implies that women should claim full credit for household chores, and take offence if their husbands tried to stand in for them or assist them, thus helping to internalise male domination as an organising principle of who does what at home.

Cleaning the toilet ("*raxas duus*" in Wolof) is a vitally important part of keeping the home clean and tidy and even more vital – and demanding and unpleasant – in households relying on on-site sanitation or lacking any form of sanitation facilities. Furthermore, engaging with sanitation or other "domestic chores" is deemed to threaten a man's masculinity and it is often the responsibility of the whole family and community to ensure that this norm is respected. The realities described in this reflection are unmistakably gendered. When receiving visitors, unclean toilets (*Gaanuway yu tilim* in Wolof) are a source of embarrassment (*Kersa*) for all dwellers but particularly those designated as "housewives".

Across African cities, a deeply asymmetric individualisation of gender roles, responsibilities, entitlements and rights obscures systemic structures of differentiation, subordination and oppression, therefore preventing their emergence as collective struggles. The field of sanitation is plagued by examples that take us to the intersection between stereotyped gender roles and unequal rights and entitlements. For instance, female tenants make a significant portion of those living in informal settlements across urban Africa, yet the link between gender, tenure security and sanitation remains largely unexplored.

In Cockle Bay – one of the oldest and most densely populated settlements along coastal Freetown – almost eighty percent of households are tenants, with female-headed households representing almost half of the total. In sharp contrast to common perceptions by outsiders as well as Freetonians, tenants are not a predominantly single and male fluctuating group; rather, a large proportion of them are women engaged in petty trade in the city centre to support their children, and they aim to remain as long-term residents. This misconception implies that female tenants aiming to remain in the settlement on a long-term basis are typically disregarded even by local community structures as potential or active contributors to community-led improvements, while, in addition, remaining outside the radar of interventions by local government and external support agencies to support them in their search for sanitation improvements.

In-depth conversations with female tenants in Cockle Bay offer further insights into the complex ways through which they navigate their invisibility within the settlement. For instance, "Amina" migrated from the countryside three decades ago. Thanks to her lineage connection with one of the local Chiefs, she settled in Hillet View, the oldest and most consolidated part of Cockle Bay. In contrast, "Fatima" moved in 2017 from a nearby rented dwelling that became unaffordable, to settle with her three children as a tenant in a predominantly Muslim area known as Mafengbeh. For both, Cockle Bay is not a provisional "shelter" solution, but rather "home". Yet, their experiences talk about the struggle to be included and recognised as part of the local community in their capacity of engaging and leading individual and collective improvements and upgrading efforts.

Women like Amina and Fatima carve different ways to be part of collective action efforts. For Amina, working with the Sierra Leone Urban Research Center (SLURC) – the local lead OVERDUE partner – as a community facilitator enabled her to realise and then share with others that not all tenants in Cockle Bay are men seeking a temporary place to sleep at night. "*I have been in this community for decades, but I only realised recently that if you are a woman and a tenant, you are not part of the story, you don't know who to talk to. Since then, I have been fighting to open the eyes of our community leaders and explain that ALL women have a right to join the local saving groups, regardless of whether or not we are tenants.*" [Author's notes, Freetown, May 2019]

In contrast, Fatima has been unable to access local community structures such as the saving groups supported by the Urban Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDURP). Her shack is next to the coast, in a spot where several hanging toilets are located, in an area that gets flooded with human waste every time it rains. Six months after settling in Cockle Bay, she started to build a defence made of sandbags to protect her home from the floods, and soon after joined forces with another three households to install a water tap and to build a shared latrine. "*At the time, people told me I was crazy to pay for things that were going to benefit my landlord and even perhaps increase my rent, but this is our home now and worth every effort, even if I don't know how long I will be able to stay here*" [*ibid*.]. In turn, the local Imam mediated to negotiate with her landlord the recognition of the improvements she made as part of her rent payments.

In the case of Fatima, being a female Muslim tenant and a single mum points to several axes of her marginalisation and dependency on a male religious authority, as the only interlocutor to negotiate some form of deal on her behalf. While single mothers who are also tenants are locally identified as those that struggle the most to improve their access to and control over better sanitation facilities, they are also treated by local community structures as "transient" dwellers in the settlement, as "people that come and go" and therefore rarely included in such structures. Tenure insecurity also prompts women like Fatima not to approach women's saving groups; pragmatism is attached to the uncertainty to stay. She recalls: "*For some time I didn't even know that there were any women's groups in Cockle Bay, my Imam told me to work hard, and he mediated with my landlord to accept some of the improvements I made as part of my rent*." [*ibid*.]

The contrasting trajectories of Amina and Fatima tell us about some of the many challenges and opportunities faced by female tenants not just in Freetown but across informal settlements in other cities. More widely, they highlight why their tenure security status is often overlooked not just by researchers and decision-makers, but also by local community structures. Their stories and embedded learning open new ways of "seeing sanitation as a woman and a tenant".

The bodies of marginalised and stigmatised men and boys also come together in the daily making of sanitation across urban Africa across multiple practices. In Saint Louis, when women cannot cope with the multiple tasks required to keep their sanitation facilities clean and safe, they seek the help of *talibés*. In many urban centres in Senegal, as in other parts of West Africa with large Muslim populations, it is common to see young boys begging in the streets, often clutching empty tomato paste tins in which they collect donations of money, food, and other items given as alms. These boys are often referred to as *talibés*, a Wolof term which, etymologically speaking, comes from the Arabic *talib*, meaning seeker of knowledge in the Qu'ran, but is colloquially used to refer to Muslim boys who beg. *Talibés* who beg are differentiated from other boys and suspected as ill-intended or even criminals, while in reality often working as an extension of women's bodies to deal with challenging tasks such as removing sludge manually from pit latrines.

Other male bodies perform similar tasks. For instance, those referred as "frogmen" in Freetown and other cities. While across the West, the term frogmen is used to describe those who are trained in scuba diving or swimming underwater often for military purposes, across many African cities frogmen, or *vyura* in Swahili, are those who plunge

into pit latrines to empty them manually as their regular job. This entails diving in pit latrines with buckets and a shovel to dig out compacted faecal sludge by hand. While they perform a critical job in stopping faeces from flooding with shit the homes of the majority of people living in so-called informal or unplanned settlements, they are systematically criminalised and stigmatised. For this reason, they perform their job at night and under dehumanising conditions. In Freetown, we found that frogmen go through a ritual of self-intoxication to perform their job, which involves consuming a number of gin sachets before, during and after performing emptying a pit latrine. It takes about 6 hours and at least three men to empty a single latrine. In Tanzania, *vyuras* face fines that amount to at least half of their collective earning – about 40 USD – and they also risk imprisonment.

**Fig. 6**: Manual pit emptiers at work in Freetown. Photo: N. Leblond.*

In Nairobi, and widely across Kenya, manual pit emptiers are known as *mchuras* (or *churas*, which in Swahili also means "frogs"), while those who operate with dedicated trucks with a storage tank and a vacuum pumping system are referred to as "human honey suckers".[2] Due to high population density and pressure on the existing toilets frequently experienced across Nairobi's informal settlements, cases of blockage are rampant. Procuring the services of a human honey sucker is often not an option, especially when it comes to challenging accessibility, and high service costs. Thus, households largely rely on *mchuras*, who offer this service at an affordable price including additional services such as unclogging man-holes and trenches, and exhausting toilets. In most cases, *mchuras* cannot afford to wear protective equipment; they use their bare hands, buckets, spades as similar tools while at work. In the long run, this work takes a toll on their health.

Informal sanitation workers labour under similar conditions and are identified colloquially by different names across urban Africa. They are known as "kaka bailers"[3] in Freetown, or "ninjas", "chopper riders" or even "human exhausters" in Nairobi, the latter being a slang expression used to describe those who empty pit latrines in those neighbourhoods where exhauster trucks cannot access (OVERDUE, 2023, input by KDI team, Kenya, July 2023). Like the majority of women and girls living in off-grid settlements, manual pit emptiers – *talibés*, *vyuras*, *mchuras*, frogmen and so forth – are the de-facto invisibilised sanitation infrastructure of most African cities. Their bodies are

subjected to different forms of violence and physical and mental illness and are the constant subject of all forms of control. Their embodied practices reveal a complex web of people as infrastructure in which care and unpaid and paid informal work play a key role in sustaining the sanitation service chain on which poor women and men rely across urban Africa. The functioning of this system relies on normalising care work as (women's and girls') duty under patriarchal relations, while precarising paid labour labelled as informal or even illegal, with both coexisting in an intricate and messy web of oppressive gendered and (neo)colonial social relations through which basic aspects of everyday life in African cities are made possible.[4]

**Things**

Finally, I move into a reading of the "things" that bridge bodies and practices to produce sanitation. Infrastructure is typically seen as the vast physical and technical complex of pipes, toilets, treatment plants and so on, that, in the case of sanitation, ensure that the flow of faecal matter moves away from our bodies into a distant elsewhere, pushing the threat of disease away from our bodies, homes and neighbourhoods to somewhere else. The things that make in one way or another what we regard as infrastructure also encompass the norms, techniques, practices, legal tools, and social relations that underpin sociality and political belonging, and regulate bodies, behaviours, and people. In this sense, things are a means to engage with spatial practices, people's experiences, needs, aspirations and rights, as well as how to exercise the latter when they are neglected or denied (Andres & Natarajan, 2023).

Here I look at the way in which bodies, practices and things get entangled and co-produce each other to either constrain or expand the spatial agency of ordinary citizens, across the territories of the household, the neighbourhood and the city. In other words, understanding infrastructure as a complex of embodied objects helps us to understand how and why the material world actively gives rise to different individual and collective subjects, and distributes highly differentiated life opportunities.

Examining how the "things" that sanitation systems deal with (faeces, urine and menstrual blood) are named (or rather not-named), the use of euphemisms is common across most languages, denoting a strong sense of discomfort in naming them explicitly. Exceptions are found when the bodily fluid in question belongs to children. For instance *saw* (urine in Wolof) is less shocking in usage when it refers to a child, but is treated euphemistically in other circumstances (*yeeslu* = to redo one's ablutions, implying after having urinated) (Sambou *et al*, 2023). Furthermore, the terms used across different languages to name faeces, urine and menstrual blood typically have negative connotations and are used in colloquial language to express disdain, contempt, insult or humiliation. For instance in Wolof *dangay day* = you're talking shit; or *li nga fi wax yépp ay puub la* = everything you've just said is a pile of shit (*ibid.*).

The expression "human waste" in itself calls for the disposal, removal and distancing from bodily fluids, closing the possibility to think about wee and poo as resources that can be safely recycled into the material cycles that support urban life. In other words, we don't have the language to talk comfortably and productively about (sh)it. Furthermore, the taboos surrounding poo are so deep-rooted that they tends to condition attitudes and relationships to bowel movements. In Wolof, this is reflected through the proliferation of euphemistic synonyms for the term *dem wanag* (going to the toilet), including *dem gannaaw kër* (literally "to go behind the house") (Sambou *et al*, 2023). This term is used specifically to refers to the facilities (or rather lack of them) used by underprivileged families who cannot afford "decent" indoor toilets or latrines. In the context of Saint Louis, the meaning of *dem wanag* is also evocative of the difference between rich and poor. Depending on the standard of living, the location of the household and the social class to which the family belongs, meeting toilet needs can be a moment of rest, comfort, ease, relief or even cogitation or, when referring to the places used by the poor, a source of embarrassment and discomfort (*ibid.*).

Popular language can be both a site of stigmatisation and of reclaiming some dignity even in the practice of open defecation. During a focus group discussion in Beira in which women and girls shared their experiences when pooing, weeing or menstruating, an old lady said "*to a large extent, things have not changed that much. In the village where I come from, we used to call people 'soldiers' when they go to the toilet, and we still do in many parts of the city today.*" To make her point clear, she raised her *capulana* [5] gracefully and jumped, pretending to skip imaginary objects on the ground, and finally squatted while covering her entire body to the point where we couldn't see an inch of her flesh. After her demonstration was met with laughter and clapping by others, she added: "*if you are a woman, that's what you do, that's what a 'soldier' looks like, you train yourself and your daughters to jump over other people's turds, just like we used to do in the north during the Civil War to avoid mines*" (Author's notes, OVERDUE FGD, Beira, March 2023). This story does not just tell us about the analogies crafted across different experiences of everyday risk; for women and girls, their *capulanas* are a means to claim some form of privacy to defecate with dignity in the open.

In Abidjan and Saint Louis, women and girls praised bleach and incense as some of the most important items they use to keep on-site sanitation facilities clear of germs and odours. In relation to the latter, a pleasant smell is a symbol of purity, hygiene and even harmony in the home, omnipresent in advertisements for hygiene and cleanliness products targeted at women, associating "nice" smells, a clean and healthy living environment, and a socially rich life. On the contrary, the persistence of bad smells can be a source of rejection or even aversion particularly for women regarded as responsible for the cleanliness of their homes (Sambou *et al*, 2023).

Many other objects make the universe of things that constitutes the daily experience of those living beyond the reach of grid toilets. In Freetown's informal settlements, these include "mask-the-hole" and "hanging toilets", make-shift structures to deal with one's faeces. In the context of South Africa, the City of Cape Town provides free water and sanitation services in all informal settlements – a rare provision by the state across other African countries – that encompasses four forms of sanitation facilities: Portable Flush Toilets (PFT) or Container-Based Sanitation (CBS) colloquially known as "pota-pota", communal full flush toilets (connected to the sewer system), shared chemical toilets (often referred as *uMshengu*), and shared container toilets (with a detachable 200-litre tank) (Dube *et al*, 2023). Among these "things", *pota-potas* – which literally means "go around" in English – are an improvement on open defecation but they are still seen by users as a substandard solution, a perception actively confronted by the Association of Mobile and Portable Sanitation Africa (AMPS Africa) and similar emerging networks seeking to meet SDG 6 through a different type of sanitation revolution than that implemented in Western Europe and North America in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Nevertheless, a consistent bias persists in the sanitation sector towards certain "things", that is towards the modern network sewerage systems that transport human waste from flush toilets into treatment plants, the grid sanitation system that only serves a small percentage of the population living across African cities. This disregard for the things, people and practices that make the off-grid sanitation universe is not incidental. It follows a pattern of differentiation and segregation initiated across urban Africa during colonial times, which persists in the post-colonial era. Through the OVERDUE project we traced infrastructural promises and investments over time and encountered the systematic consolidation of the colonial distinction between the so-called "reef" and the "concrete" city, that is between the quarters of the city inhabited by the native population and the colonial masters.

**Fig. 7**: Sanitation things. Photo: A. Allen.*.

Even today, the bulk of infrastructural investments go into the old cement city now occupied by post-colonial elites and the rising middle class. The so called “international infrastructural turn” (Dodson, 2017) aptly describes the trillions of dollars globally invested in water, sewage, energy and transportation worldwide. Yet, as argued by Siemiatycki *et al* (2020: 297) “[t]his turn also has a qualitative dimension: the perceived completeness and effective functioning of modern infrastructure is frequently used as a symbol of prosperity, vitality and a site of political leadership”. In the context of urban Africa this massive flow of investments continues to fuel policy imaginaries, aspirations and promises as markers of modernity and away from a people-centric notion of infrastructure.

Furthermore, the contemporary infrastructural turn is fuelling all forms of speculative urbanism, while at the same time pushing the majority of the urban poor across Africa into the so-called informal city, an expression and outcome of the processes of auto-construction by which ordinary women and men perform everyday city-making across the urban global south. Teresa Caldeira (2017) highlights three key features of these processes. First, they are long-term, incremental, and perennially in the making; second, they interact transversely with the dominant logics of state regulation, real estate finance and commodity circulation; third, through these processes, some city-makers become fluent in claiming and realising their right to the city, thus expanding their political and spatial agency. These processes are actively at play in the contemporary struggle for some form of sanitation across urban Africa, yet the things – pit latrines, buckets, shovels, jerry cans, bleach and incense – that support the sanitation systems of the poor are consistently overlooked by sanitation master plans and investments. As argued by Siemiatycki *et al* (2019), “[t]hinking through the gendered production of infrastructure reveals the fundamental dynamics of difference and hierarchy upon which modern society is being built” (p. 309).

**Imaginaries**

The three interlinked sites examined above open multiple possibilities for other ways of knowing and doing, of seeking sanitation justice and gender equality as one, of opening other imaginaries.

Methodologically, it is critical to turn struggles that are experienced and perceived as private and individual into collective ones that live through and outside our bodies and minds. I am talking here about such thinking and practising liberating methodologies as critical pedagogies, as means of conscientisation, instead of awareness raising, education or other forms of behavioural change, so commonly advocated in the field of sanitation. Epistemologically, this entails shifting our gaze beyond the treatment of disease and the infrastructures that are meant to prevent it, to denounce how and why they rely on the social construction of deeply gendered sanitation and health inequities, of systems that operate as machineries of stigmatisation.

What we can see throughout the fieldwork testimonies shared in this chapter – and also through an in-depth exploration of sanitation policies and campaigns – reveals the working of taboos and stigma as both a mechanism and cause of illness. In other words, well-intentioned sanitation interventions and health programs can generate and reproduce stigma and many other unintended consequences for the very groups that they aim to serve. For instance, many hygiene and sanitation projects generate social pressure and shame in the name of improved health, exacerbating gender and racial disparities within global health inequalities. Programmes such as Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), which are designed for communities to build their own toilets, work by levering social pressure and expectations to generate shame, fear, and disgust when desirable hygiene norms are violated. As a result, individuals in communities, and particularly women, where this approach is implemented, face great stigma and the threat of identity and status devaluation. Put simply, those who cannot afford purchasing a toilet or who continue to practise traditional hygiene norms often receive harsh moral judgement and social and institutional punishment. Furthermore, hygiene stigmas can lead to the emergence not only of epidemics, but also depression and moral devastation, as well as financial strains and debt, when the ability to follow prescribed norms is beyond reach. This has a number of consequences that call for embracing the making and unmaking of deeply gendered sanitation stigmas. Sanitation and health interventions readily stigmatise their so-called beneficiary subjects, derailing ongoing public health efforts, and invariably hurting people who are already at risk, not only physically and mentally, but also by undermining their agency.

In unmaking sanitation stigmas, we need to remember that the process of stigmatisation and its reinforcement is subtle, easily hidden, and in constant flux (Allen, 2022). As a result, we all bear responsibility to provide true healing from the damage of stigma from previous sanitation projects and campaigns, and also from ways of portraying what sanitation inequalities look like and entail. This responsibility extends to reframing the education of sanitation and health professionals beyond the treatment and fixing of ill bodies and health risks, and of incomplete infrastructures.

It is therefore critical to interrogate why infrastructure projects have the differential effects they have, and why such projects often reproduce, amplify, or generate social inequalities. An intersectional interrogation of gender equity and inequity in infrastructure production alongside the deployment of critiques of Eurocentric and persistent colonial practices has the potential to identify more just orientations for development planning interventions. In short, feminising urban struggles involves recognising stigma elimination as a necessary and core component of all global health and sanitation efforts, as well as developing the sensitivities and alertness to challenge the moral scrutiny and consequent inequalities tied to ordinary citizens' bodies and practices, while recognising their struggles simultaneously as "a race struggle, a class struggle, a women's struggle, an age struggle and more, all at once" (Mann, 2001: 259).

Furthermore, seeing and listening to African cities through the bodies, practices and things that make sanitation offers a critical avenue for understanding the ever-in-the-making identity of the post-colonial African city beyond the foreign gaze, beyond the binary narratives, ideological formations and normative assumptions and expectations that – as argued by Power (2003) – "have flowed from colonialism into development" (p. 137).

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**NOTES**

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1. This chapter draws from the research project entitled *OVERDUE: Tackling the sanitation taboo across urban Africa*, led by Prof. A. Allen, supported by UKRI GCRF ESRC, award number: ES/T007699/1. All views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the author. For more information visit: http://overdue-justsanitation.net

2. While the term *mchura* is widely perceived as derogative, manual pit emptiers participating in a training session held by SuSanA in Mombasa in 2015 shared that some workers have re-appropriated the term to the extent that they don't any longer perceive it as an insult, but as a marker of identity (SuSanA, 2015).

3. A 2016 news article titled "Bill and Melinda Gate [*sic*] are the new kaka bailers of Freetown" announces the decision by Freetown City Council and Goal to establish a Faecal Sludge Management Unit to address the "occasional nuisances" caused by disposal of human waste into open water bodies and the sea while attracting private sector investors. *Salone News*, 8 Dec 2016 [https://apctimes.com/bill-and-melinda-gate-are-the-new-kaka-bailers-of-freetown/]

4. For an expansion of this argument see: Kats (2001); Mollet and Faria (2013); and Federici (2014).

5. A long sarong worn primarily by women in Mozambique but also across other parts of Southern Africa.

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