



**“There are ecosystems within broader movements that we can resource”: Fadekemi Akinfaderin of Fòs Feminista on resource mobilization, localization of responses, and cultivating partnerships.**

**Lissa Harris**  
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**Lissa Harris:** If you could introduce yourself and talk about your organization and the problem that you are tackling and how you're addressing it.

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** My name is Fadekemi Akinfaderin. Most people call me Kemi. I'm based in Lomé, Togo, and I am the Chief Global Advocacy Officer at Fos Feminista. I coordinate all our global advocacy work, connecting advocacy from the national to the regional to the global level, including work at the UN at all levels. Fos Feminista is a global alliance, an international coalition of over 300 organizations working to advance sexual and reproductive health rights and justice. As an alliance, we work with autonomous and independent organizations that come together with a shared objective and vision of upholding sexual and reproductive rights and justice, along with its intersecting issues.

As an organization, we have five core priority areas. We work on the issues of safe and legal abortion. We work on the issues of comprehensive sexuality education. We work on the issues of sexual and gender-based violence. We work on the issues of family planning, contraception, and services. We take a very comprehensive approach to sexual and reproductive health and

justice. We are an organization that centers care and views care as a critical piece. We work with organizations that deliver services, as well as those that do advocacy, to ensure that we create an enabling environment for delivering sexual and reproductive health rights and justice.

I think your work is connected to ours. Sexual and gender-based violence is one of our core priority areas, and it's an area where we've been supporting feminist movements to mobilize, engage, and implement various activities. We view your research as intersecting with our work on adolescents, young people, and sexual and gender-based violence. We do work with adolescents, which still covers some of this range. Our work also focuses on ending sexual and gender-based violence faced by adolescents and young people.

**Lissa Harris: Could you tell me a little about your audience, who they are, and how you communicate with them? How do you bring attention to the issues?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** We look at our work on two levels. I don't want to create a hierarchy by suggesting that one is higher than the other; they're simply two distinct areas of focus. One area is the work our partners do. As an institution, we provide core support to organizations, meaning we offer unrestricted funding to help them advance their own agendas on these issues. Many of our partners are deeply engaged in work around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Our partners are primarily based in Latin America and the Caribbean, where we have the majority of our collaborations. We also have several partners in Africa, particularly in the SWANA [Southwest Asia and North Africa] region—primarily in Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey—as well as in Asia and the Pacific, specifically in the Philippines and Fiji.

SWANA, formerly known as the Middle East, but politically and within feminist spaces, we refer to that region as Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). We support our partners providing flexible funding so they can do the work on the ground in their countries and advance the agenda of ending sexual and gender-based violence. Our partners do a lot of things, like working as part of committees with governments, developing policy, and creating guidelines. Several of our partners work to provide support through sexual assault referral centers and integrate SGBV care into their facilities. We also have diverse partners working to educate rights holders including adolescents and young people, about their right to be free from any form of violence. Some of them are funding and supporting work around comprehensive sexuality education, which we see as one of the core pillars in the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.

On the other side, we do a lot of advocacy around SGBV. All the work we do in the UN is ensuring that normative frameworks, which actually dictate the way resources are invested and also

dictates how policies are developed because national and regional initiatives come from some of these normative frameworks and guidance. We are involved in processes at the UN, including the Commission on the Status of Women, the Human Rights Council, and the Commission on Population and Development. We also work with the Third Committee, which has a series of resolutions related to gender-based violence.

We focus on making sure that resolutions from these political processes recognize the needs of different communities, including young people, and children. Our goal is to ensure that these policies reflect the realities and experiences of our partners regarding what works to address these issues. We want these considerations to be included in these documents so that they guide programming and investments moving forward. Lastly, we work on capacity strengthening for our partners. We facilitate community of sharing, which is a South-to-South strategy where we support partners to learn from each other and share their experiences on specific issues like GBV.

**Lissa Harris: Would it be fair to say that, on one hand, you're working directly with organizations on the front lines to support them and build their capacity, and then, you're taking their concerns and needs and trying to make sure that they get into broader global policy making efforts?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Exactly. We also create space for them to learn about what's working in other countries and contexts, so they can use that information to influence their own national policies and guidelines on what governments need to do more. I want to highlight the bidirectional nature of the work that we do.

**Lissa Harris: Are your partners more involved in guiding national policy in their own contexts than you are?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Yes, partners are best suited to do that as they are on the front lines. Our work is to support that effort, not to step in. We don't have regional offices. We work exclusively through partners on the ground who are directly involved, and we trust their expertise, knowledge, and experience. Our role is more about being a movement catalyzer and creating space for learning and sharing at a global level.

We also leverage regional initiatives that can have an impact on national levels and vice versa. For example, in the Africa region, a new initiative on ending sexual and gender-based violence is launching soon. We are working to ensure our partners' national experiences inform the AU

commitment, and reflect the true situation on the continent in terms of government commitment. We do the same in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific.

**Lissa Harris: Can you talk about what makes your approach different from other organizations working in a similar space?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** We don't have physical offices anywhere. We recognize that the partners on the ground are the experts and we see ourselves as facilitators and connectors. Providing them with resources, whether financial or non-financial, is our core objective, so they can do their work better.

Another distinct aspect is bridging and connecting what we see on the ground to influence policy and decision-making at other levels. For example, with the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], which guide a lot of resources and investment. We ensure these global multilateral processes are comprehensive, diverse, and meet the needs on the ground. Ensuring that these frameworks are effective means that investments address the needs of people locally and influence global processes is our strength.

A third aspect is connecting different organizations to learn from each other and share their challenges, practical resources, tools, and research. Working across multiple geographies exposes us to very different contexts and drivers of sexual and gender-based violence, including religion, culture, etc. Facilitating this exchange allows organizations to see what might work in their own context based on similarities with other regions, adding significant value to the space.

**Lissa Harris: Which is very in line with what we're trying to do with this project, so we can learn from you too. Is there an example that you like that illustrates the impact of the work that you do and how did you know it was working?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). One of the things we've seen is that we have something called a Center for Learning and Exchange. In that space, partners connect with each other, learn about tools to institutionalize CSE within the education sector in their countries, and develop resources to better support teachers, learners, and those outside the school setting.

We also had situations where they reviewed each other's content and said, "Oh, this is really interesting, especially the way you address the needs of sexually diverse people in your curriculum. Maybe we can look at incorporating this in our conversations with our government,

or consider how violence against children shows up in the education sector, and how we can learn from that.

Argentina is a perfect example of a country that has had its CSE program for the longest time; it's part of their law. Our partners in Kenya and Nigeria were able to learn a lot from that. In India, they noted how Argentina tackles this issue within the curriculum and how it strengthens teachers' capacities to discuss this topic comfortably.

I feel like the issues of SGBV have been an entry point for advancing the conversation around comprehensive sexuality education in schools across countries. Some of our partners are saying, rather than going straight to CSE, let's focus on an issue that drives people to action and present CSE as a solution. We've also seen this approach with access to safe abortion, using SGBV as an entry point. This helps people better understand why these issues are interconnected and not just isolated, operating in different ways.

**Lissa Harris: Could you talk about something you tried that didn't work and that you learned something important from that others could learn from?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** I think one of the other things we haven't done very well is mobilizing actors to understand how normative frameworks shape work at the national level and for people to connect with it and see value in investing in that space. Why should we care if UNICEF has a guideline on ending sexual and gender-based violence against children? We should care because it will guide UNICEF's work nationally and will also guide investments from private foundations and bilateral governments. It's important for people to understand the process of policymaking and guideline development. We haven't done enough of this because some of us focus too much on the details and haven't helped people make the connection or see the value of these frameworks as part of their broader agenda to end sexual and gender-based violence.

**Lissa Harris: Can you talk about other challenges that you faced, setting aside funding, and how are you working to solve them?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** I think one large-scale challenge is taking an intersectional approach to this work. We've been so conditioned to work in silos, and I don't think we can end the issues of sexual and gender-based violence against children without looking at all the other intersecting factors. How does this relate to early and forced marriage? How does this relate to climate change and the issues affecting communities most impacted by climate change? How are we looking at this from both the perspective of the education sector and beyond it? Nobody wants

to talk about issues relating to children and even access to safe abortion, but we need to view this as part of comprehensive care, not just from a judgmental perspective. We need to consider what a survivor needs. This is the greatest challenge. We are so fixated on working on one issue that we don't think about how other factors drive or mitigate these problems. We need to have solutions that are intersectional, not one-size-fits-all. The more we work in intersectional ways, the more successful we will be with this work.

**Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about whether shifting cultural norms around these issues is part of your work and how do you do that? What are the strategies that you use? What's most effective at shifting deep societal cultural attitudes?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** We have an amazing partner in Nigeria who launched a campaign aimed to address the perception of survivor blaming called *What She Wore*. They took pictures of different articles of women's clothing and gave a little summary across different issues, including those of children and women who are fully clothed. Every time I go to their office, I see a different message, a different story and a picture, and it just moves me a lot. I've also heard that they've used it with first ladies, and with parliamentarians and legislators. They've used it in schools to break this perception of blame and shame, show the variety of who can be sexually assaulted, and to address the stigma of who the ideal victim or survivor should be from the perspective of the public. These are the kinds of things I think are interesting.

I've been looking for funding to get them to put some of these things on buses or billboards in public spaces because I think it could spark conversations. Scaling up is a challenge. People are doing innovative communication strategies, but they're very localized in certain contexts and communities, so there needs to be more saturation. I think we need to do a better job at capitalizing on those moments. If we use these effective communication strategies to saturate public awareness and provide resources for action, we can make a difference.

**Lissa Harris: Your work relies pretty heavily on partnership. Can you talk about how you cultivate and maintain partnerships with frontline organizations and policymakers on the international stage?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** We have a small but very mighty team whose work is maintaining these relationships. In every region, we have a focal point. What we intend to do is create space for our partners because they're in our alliance. There's already routine communication and engagement. For our work with decision-makers, especially at the UN, we have two dedicated people. As we speak, they are meeting with member states as we prepare for a resolution on

sexual and gender-based violence in a couple of days, in preparation for the UN General Assembly. They're doing technical briefings to bring partners to speak about these issues.

This adds value to their work and to their understanding, so that when they're negotiating, they do so from a more informed perspective. We constantly look for opportunities to cultivate relationships, either with webinars, briefings with member states, or convenings and exchanges for our partners or others working in this area.

**Lissa Harris: Do you seek out new ones? Do organizations that are starting up seek you out for funding or support? How do you find and build new relationships?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Both. It's two-way, bidirectional. Some organizations actively seek us out, but we also go to movement-building spaces or convenings where we can meet new people. This December, there is the Association for Women in Development, AWID. It's held every four years, and this year's big meeting will be in Bangkok. We will meet organizations working at grassroots levels there. If there are areas we've prioritized because of new funding or donors, we tap into existing people we know in our networks. We either know people in every country or have connections in regions that connect us to others within those countries.

We also do public engagement, though we don't use it for cultivating new funding relationships; it's more of a closed process. However, as an alliance, we can't offer resources to everyone at the same magnitude or even at all. We try to offer some resources through webinars as learning exchange spaces. We open these up more publicly so that those not in our alliance can also participate. We ask partners to recommend others in their communities or regions to join and share, so we can begin to cultivate relationships with new contacts.

**Lissa Harris: You talked about the global geography of where you operate. What is driving those decisions about where you build partnerships in the world?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Our transformation. We were made out of three original organizations. It was the International Planned Parenthood Federation of Western Hemisphere, the International Women's Health Coalition, and Change based in DC. These three organizations came together, merged, and we created Fos Feminista. Our current partnerships are legacy partnerships. We are in a process of rethinking long-term growth and expansion of the alliance, and what indices we would use for making these decisions. We work in ecosystems.

We do not fund a movement. A lot of people confuse movements and networks. We recognize that there are ecosystems within broader movements that we can resource. Some might exist

and we can work with them and some might not exist that we might be through the resourcing and the funding we're providing, we're nesting and we're facilitating the creation of ecosystems that include service providers, working on advocacy, and those working on the ground survivor-led initiatives, etc.

Then we look at ways of moving forward. We think about geographies in which there isn't much investment, spaces and opportunities for transnational connection. We are very interested right now in looking and resourcing in the Lusophone region in Africa because we think that this could be a really great place to be able to connect with the work that we have long-standing investments in Brazil and we want to be able to see how we can be able to foster more global south connections because we are a global south-led alliance.

**Lissa Harris: What are the main lessons that could be taken from your work that other people working in this field could learn from?**

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Bringing the right people to the table to help to advise, creating space for learning, joint thinking and joint action. I think it would then be more responsive to the needs of the movement and the ecosystems that you would potentially be supporting. I think it also helps people to feel grounded in this work that it's actually realistic and it's something that would add value to the work. There's a lot of new initiatives coming up, there's so many spaces to be in, it's like never ending the creation of new things. People need to feel really connected and have clarity that whatever initiative, whatever ideas are coming out of the process that you might be engaging in is something that adds value to their work.

If you involve them in the design process, I think that helps to make it concrete and a reality. Working cross-regionally and transnationally is extremely hard because you're fighting against several big systemic issues that we don't have any wiggle room on: time zones, language, huge, huge structural barriers. It's never going to be perfect. We try as much as possible to imbibe the principles of language justice and time zone justice, but we never get it right. Sometimes, it's true—my Latin American colleagues complain they're waking up too early, while my colleagues in Fiji are dealing with midnight and 1:00 a.m. meetings. I don't believe in just doing things that are only regional and focusing solely on that region because then you lose the beauty of what we need right now: a global movement. I think that's a big challenge.

**Lissa Harris: What do you think has the potential to make a really significant impact on the field in the next five years? In regards to child sexual violence, is there something that you see as potentially making a big impact?**



**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Working in more intersectional ways. I think we would overlook the issue of resourcing, but it's not just the amount of money; it's the type of money. A lot of the types of money we see right now are very metrics-heavy, already cookie-cutter baked, and it's not really letting people think and experiment. We need more space to think and experiment, as we are saying, and to fail, as we were discussing. I do think that thinking about the quality of the resourcing, not necessarily about the volume. Experiment, fail, and learn, is important.

**Lissa Harris:** What does it take to get a community or an organizing or policymaking body to feel responsible for the issue that you're working on?

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Stories. Stories that connect the heart and the head, but not stories that are so focused on the problems, but that can also help people to think about how they can take action so that it's concrete. I see this resonating with people in the community. I've done a lot of work in different countries, but because I'm Nigerian, I've done a lot of work in Nigeria. When I think about some of the experiences around, for example, female genital mutilation (FGM) an issue that involves thinking about how you're showcasing and supporting survivors to make this problem visible.

It's hard to do that. They can be positioned in a way that's not instrumentalizing, but transformative. I do think that there is space, to be honest with you, to learn from other movements and what's been done. We are dealing with similar cultural issues in some of these contexts. It's about culture and context around sexuality, bodily autonomy, and also around personhood. There are other allied movements and work from which we could borrow lessons. There's a lot of work that's happened around child marriage that we can look at and see what we can learn. But it needs to be symbiotic. It needs to be bidirectional in many ways.

**Lissa Harris:** What does it take to get UN bodies to take up the priorities of your partners and make sure that their policy reflects the experiences that you're seeing on the front lines? What does it take to move that needle?

**Fadekemi Akinfaderin:** Concrete research and documentation of experiences from the ground and being connected. The UN also holds consultations, but the right people aren't always there or it's the same people every time. There are important intersections missing. I think it's about making sure we keep an understanding of opportunities in front of us at all times, but also trying as much as possible to support organizations that are working on the front line and documenting their experiences, documenting issues, and developing platforms for them to share that information themselves, be it with UN agencies or government agencies.

**Lissa Harris: This has been a terrific conversation and thank you again for your time.**

*Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.*

*\*\*This conversation has been edited and condensed.*