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Women and the Creative Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa: A scoping Review

Prepared by the Behind the Scenes Project Team

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Acronyms

GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
SSA:	Sub-Saharan Africa
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNCTAD:	UN Trade and Development
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme

Executive Summary

Broadly defined as those industries rooted in individual creativity, skill, and talent, and potentially able to create wealth and jobs through the exploitation of intellectual property, the creative sector has become a significant contributor to sub-Saharan Africa's development and is now widely recognized as the region's most dynamic economic growth area. Creative and cultural productions, including digital artistic entrepreneurship, employ millions of Africans and generate billions of dollars in revenue. The sector has birthed a thriving new generation of African creative and digital entrepreneurs who generate livable, sometimes abundant wages. At the same time, however, the region's creative industry faces myriad social, economic, equity, access, and inclusion challenges. One of these is gender inequality, which prevents women creatives from accessing, pursuing, and staying on in careers or fields that they consider fulfilling, respectable, and productive. But even with growing calls for information that would help address the barriers that women creatives face in sub-Saharan Africa, broad overviews of women's status in this sector are scarce.

This scoping review (which is part of a broader initiative to understand and address gendered inequities in the SSA's creative sector) synthesizes existing research evidence on the contributions and challenges of women creatives in SSA. The review seeks answers to three mutually reinforcing questions: 1) In which sub-sectors and roles do female creatives in SSA participate in the industry? 2) What challenges do they face? and 3) How do female creatives in the region negotiate or cope with these challenges? Answers to these questions can inform new research questions and provide evidence for the formulation and implementation of policy and programmatic action.

The review covered a 24-year period (2000–2024) and drew on multiple databases including African Journals Online, Africa-Wide Information, Web of Science, Art & Architecture Source, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academic Search Ultimate, and Film & Television Literature Index. While peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters form the review's primary source of evidence, information from select electronically accessible opinion articles, reports, conference papers, and graduate theses were also incorporated. Findings from the review are presented under four broad themes: women's participation in creative occupations, women creatives' journeys, the challenges of women creatives, and women creatives' strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Key Findings

While women are primarily in low-value creative roles in both traditional and contemporary creative professions in SSA, evidence in the literature also shows growing female participation in creative roles and subsectors such as film directing, photography, disk jockeying, and cinema production that have historically been dominated by men.

Key challenges that women face revolve around systemic and institutional constraints, cultural expectations, globalization, unsupportive policy frameworks, male control of the creative sector's critical infrastructure, and gender stereotypes. These challenges result in women's job insecurity, gendered pay gaps, unsafe working conditions, irregular incomes and work schedules, limited recognition, exploitation, and their being bypassed for opportunities. Women creatives cope with these challenges through advocacy, networking, acquiescence, family and community support, or by exiting the industry.

Addressing the systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers to young women's participation in the creative economy requires a strengthened ecosystem and engagement with key stakeholders including creatives, policymakers, guilds, creative sector financiers, and employers. Generally, a credible growth trajectory can be created in SSA's creative industry through improved governance of the sector. Gender wage discrimination, dangerous and poor working conditions, sexual abuse and harassment, and limited access to funding and financial support among women creatives require policy and programmatic action by government and professional creative bodies. The sector also urgently needs bespoke interventions and programs to improve mentorship, skill development, workplace safety, and market and funding access for female creatives. Efforts to address the challenges facing women creatives in SSA would also benefit from additional research for a more comprehensive understanding of the working conditions and experiences of women in different creative sub-sectors.

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Introduction

The creative sector is now widely recognized as the next "goldmine" and most dynamic economic growth area in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Leke and Yeboah-Amankwah 2018; UNCTAD n.d.; UNDP and UNESCO n.d.). For the last two decades, creative economy exports have continued to outpace those of other industries in region (UNCTAD 2022). Creative and cultural productions, including digital artistic entrepreneurship, employ millions of Africans and generate billions of dollars in revenue (Leke and Yeboah-Amankwah 2018; Muchira 2023). Siele (2025) suggests that since 2019, sub-Saharan Africa's creative sector has contributed nearly 4% of sub-Saharan Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and generated more than $58 billion in revenue. Currently, the sector adds an estimated $4.2 billion to the region's economy annually (Yieke 2024) and accounts for 8.2% of all jobs, more than any other continent, and greater than the global average (Afreximbank 2024). Africa's video, movie, and film sub-sector alone currently generates over $5 billion in annual revenue and employs over 20 million people (Ayisi-Ahwireng 2017; UNCTAD n.d.). By 2040, this sub-sector will generate an additional $20 billion in annual revenue and create 20 million new jobs (Leke and Yeboah-Amankwah 2018; UNCTAD n.d.).

In 2022 alone, the region's live music sector generated nearly $200 million, a figure that is expected to double before the decade ends (Kiwewa 2024). Africa's annual music streaming revenues will hit $314.6 million by 2026, up from $92.9 million in 2021 (Retief 2023). The value of Africa's digital media and entertainment market is estimated at $35.86 billion (Statista 2025), and the value of its booming fashion industry at $31 billion (Benissan 2023). Revenue in Africa's books market is projected to hit

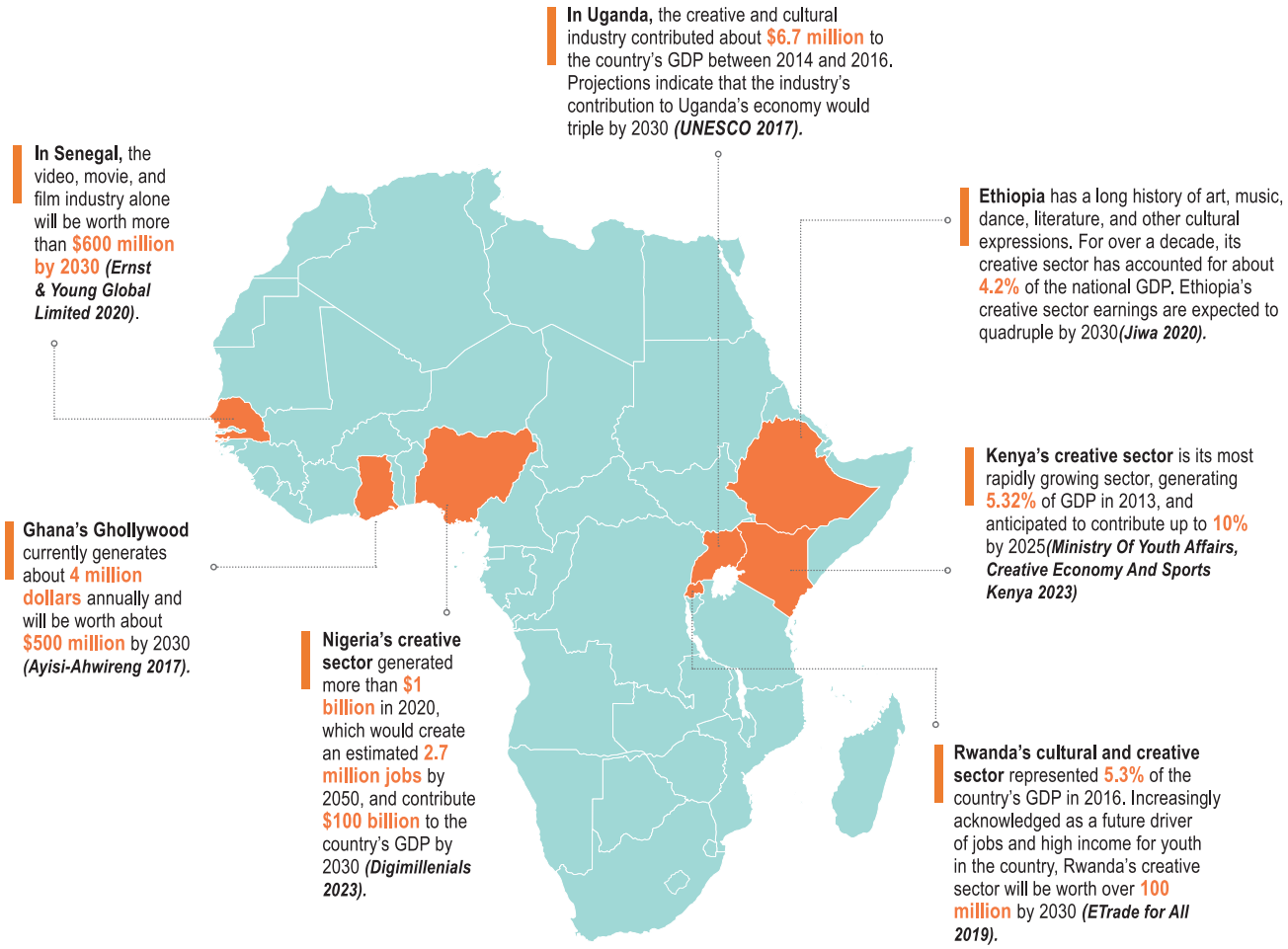
$2.3 billion in 2025, on the heels of a surge in digital publications, reflecting a growing trend toward accessible literature among younger audiences (Statista 2025a). While the value of the region's art market is currently $1.5 billion (TIAA 2023), more broadly, its cultural and other forms of tourism contributed $168 billion to the region's GDP in 2024 and supported over 18 million jobs (TSTT 2024). By 2030, forecasts show that Africa will produce up to 10% of global exports of creative goods, valued at around $200 billion (or 4% of the region's GDP) (Diouf 2024). Many sources have noted that, well before the global crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual platforms had birthed a thriving new generation of African creative and digital entrepreneurs who generate livable, sometimes abundant, wages online (Strong and Ossei-Owusu 2014; UNCTAD 2022). Revenue streams generated by music aggregators through downloads of Africa-based artists' music and ringtones hit nearly $10 billion at the end of 2020 (UNCTAD n.d.).

From the actress and actor in a local movie, through the comedian telling jokes to live audiences, to the young dancer, documentarian, Instagrammer, fashion designer, photographer, spoken word artists, or TikTok skit performer, African creatives are reaping benefits from wide-ranging opportunities in the creative sector. The World Bank predicts that as connectivity and access to digital platforms grow, digital creative entrepreneurship in SSA will also expand (World Bank 2019). Forecasts indicate that revenues from digital platforms in SSA will grow between 28% and 40% in the next decade, driven by youth entrepreneurs, creators, and a fast-expanding consumer base (Ernst & Young Global Limited 2020).

The impact of this sector can be seen clearly when looking at individual countries in SSA. For instance, Kenya's creative sector is its most rapidly growing sector, generating 5.3% of GDP in 2013, and anticipated to contribute up to 10% by 2025 (Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports Kenya 2023). Ghana's Ghollywood currently generates about $4 million annually and will be worth about $500 million by

Development actors have emphasized the need for intentional strategies to prepare women and girls in Africa for future roles as dignified workers, sector leaders, entrepreneurs, professionals, and change agents.

The creative sector in selected African countries



2030 (Ayisi-Ahwireng 2017). In Senegal, the video, movie, and film industry alone will be worth more than $600 million by 2030 (Ernst & Young Global Limited 2020). Nigeria's creative sector generated more than $1 billion in 2020, which would create an estimated 2.7 million jobs by 2050, and contribute $100 billion to the country's GDP by 2030 (Digimillenials 2023). According to UNESCO (2017), Uganda's creative and cultural sector contributed over $6.7 million to the country's GDP between 2014 and 2016 and will triple its economic contribution by 2030. ETrade for All (2019) asserts that Rwanda's cultural and creative sector not only accounted for 5.3% of the country's GDP in 2016, but it is increasingly recognized in several of the countries policies as a future driver of jobs and high income for Rwandan youth, with an expected worth of more than $100 million by 2030. Ethiopia has a long history of art, music, dance, literature, and other cultural expressions. For over a decade, its creative sector has accounted for about 4.2% of the national GDP. Ethiopia's creative sector earnings

are expected to quadruple by 2030 (Jiwa 2020).

These exciting trends notwithstanding, SSA's creative industry faces myriad social, economic, equity, access, and inclusion challenges. Gender inequity, which prevents women creatives from having productive, dignified, and meaningful careers in the sector, remains one of the major, but frequently ignored, key challenges for the sector in Africa (Ansell 2024; Bisschoff 2009; Ofori 2024). For the region to fully seize the opportunity offered by the sector, investments are needed to support, expand, and sustain women's participation in the industry, inspiring more creativity and addressing gendered and other inequities in and barriers to entry, retention, and advancement (Gregorio 2016). Evidence-driven interventions are needed to ensure healthy, productive, dignified, and fulfilling work futures for Africa's women creatives (Franco and Njogu 2020).

Development actors have emphasized the need for intentional strategies to prepare women and girls in Africa for future roles as dignified workers, sector leaders, entrepreneurs, professionals, and change agents (Alozie and Akpan□Obong 2017; Hakura et al. 2016; Manda and Mwakubo 2014; Tshishonga 2021). The development of such strategies will benefit from a synthesis of the existing evidence on the circumstances and challenges of women creatives in the region. However, currently, and to the best of our knowledge, no robust synthesis of existing research evidence on women creatives in SSA exists.

This review will help bridge this gap by synthesizing research evidence around the contributions and challenges of women creatives in SSA. The review asks three major and mutually reinforcing questions: 1) In which sub-sectors and roles do female creatives in SSA participate in the industry? 2) What challenges do they face? and 3) how do they negotiate or cope with these challenges? Answers to these questions can inform new research directions and provide evidence for the formulation and implementation of effective policy and programmatic action.

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The creative sector

In the literature, terms like "creative industries," "creative sector," "creative economy," "cultural and creative sector," and "cultural and creative economy" are used interchangeably to refer to the contested concept of the creative sector. The 2008 UN Creative Economy Report asserts that "there is no unique definition of the 'creative economy'. It is a subjective concept that is still being shaped. There is, however, growing convergence on a core group of activities and their interactions both in individual countries and at the international level" (UNCTAD 2008). Often conceptualized as industries based on cultural values or other artistic individual or collective creative expressions, the creative sector broadly includes fashion design, film, theater and the performing arts, advertising, architecture, literature and publishing, broadcast media, software development, recorded music, and arts and crafts (Booyens 2012; Cunningham and Flew 2019; Davies and Sigthorsson, 2013; Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2018; Franco and Njogu 2020; Ministry of Youth Affairs, Creative Economy and Sports Kenya 2023; Setyaningsih et al. 2012).

UNCTAD maintains that maximizing the potential of Africa's creative economy requires interventions that address inequities and support participation, inclusion, access, safety, and dignity for creatives, particularly women and girls (UNCTAD n.d.). Further, the COVID-19 pandemic affected Africa's creative industries, undermining entire value chains and significantly distressing many creatives and cultural professionals (Yegon et al. 2021). The pandemic highlighted the urgent need for governments and countries to 'build back better' through inclusive economic recovery plans and policies that prioritize women and youth, and all those at risk of exploitation or being left behind in all sectors of development (Fox and Signé 2020).

This review synthesizes the existing body of research on women creatives in SSA, a group that is increasingly at risk of not reaping the full benefits of the growth and advancements in the region's creative sector. The review discusses issues pertaining to the participation of women creatives in the sector, the challenges they encounter, and their strategies for coping with these challenges.

Methodology

The literature search for this review covered a 24-year period, from 2000 to 2024. It was conducted on multiple databases, including the African Journals Online, Africa-Wide Information, Web of Science, Art & Architecture Source, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academic Search Ultimate, and Film & Television Literature Index PsycINFO, ERIC PubMed, Communication & Mass Media Complete. While peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters form the primary source of evidence used in this review, select electronically accessible opinion articles, journalistic reports, conference papers, and graduate theses were also included in the review. The exact search terms varied by database, but most of the searches incorporated all the creative sectors and sub-creative sectors identified in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2018) definition as well as terms such as creative sectors, female/women creatives, creativity, cultural economy, and creatives (and the different ways these are referred to in scholarly and development discourses).

Article selection, article quality evaluation, and analysis

After removing duplicate search results, all remaining papers and documents were imported into Zotero, a software that provides electronic reference management

and allows for methodical review of paper titles and abstracts as well as full-text screening. To evaluate if a publication met the inclusion criteria, three reviewers independently screened its title and abstract. A fourth reviewer resolved discrepancies, and their reasoning was communicated with the entire team of reviewers. Following the completion of the title and abstract screening, each potentially suitable article was subjected to an independent full text review by two reviewers. To be included for full review, the material needed to be published between 2000 and 2024; explicitly focused on women creatives in SSA and addressing issues related their situations and circumstances in SSA, the sub-sectors and roles in which they participate, the challenges they face, or how they negotiate or cope with these challenges; published as a book chapter, journal paper, newspaper, magazine, research report, or Masters or PhD thesis; and be accessible or purchasable online.

Reviewers convened to settle any disagreements over the inclusion of an article. An adaptation of the Critical Appraisal Programme quality appraisal instrument was also used to assess the quality of all studies included (Dixon-Woods et al. 2007). Author names and titles; publication and study years; study aim(s); study design; sampling strategy; data collection methods and setting; sample size and characteristics; inclusion and exclusion criteria; analysis methods; and relevant sample for the systematic review were extracted using a standardized form. No materials or studies were excluded based on the quality assessment. The methodological rigor and depth of analysis of the materials and studies differed substantially.

The search phase, which took place between August and September 2024, produced 78,031 articles. After more refined searches and deletion of duplicates in Zotero, we retained 2,047 materials and screened the titles and abstracts of 327 unique papers and documents. Based on the inclusion criteria (outlined above), 229 articles were eliminated from the sample following full-text reviews, leaving 98 documents and articles that met the study's inclusion criteria. Hand-searches of references listed in each paper or material that met the inclusion criteria were also conducted to identify other potential papers and materials for inclusion. In all, the selected materials included qualitative, quantitative and mixed studies, reports, theses, journal articles, etc., published in English or French on the theme of women creatives from different countries in SSA.

Organization of findings

The review's findings are presented under the following four themes: women's participation in creative occupations (including the kinds of creative works in which women are involved, the roles they play, the benefits they report); women creatives' journeys (how they entered their creative careers and how they experience their roles); women creatives' challenges (barriers, concerns, and problems they face); and women creatives' strategies for overcoming or coping with the challenges they face in the industry. Relying on Thomas and Harden's thematic synthesis approach, we iteratively and collaboratively abstracted findings into analytical themes (Thomas and Harden 2008). The studies included in the review can be found in the reference list at the end of the report.

Findings

Women in creative occupations/creative sectors in SSA

Published research on women creatives in SSA has focused on a range of traditional and modern creative sectors and occupations [1, 2], particularly visual and performing arts, photography, filmmaking, scriptwriting, digital arts, advertising, comedy, theater and drama acting, choreography, writing, poetry, music, hairstyling and body aesthetics and arts, traditional and modern craftmaking (jewelry and beadwork, weaving, pottery, art deco, sculpting, fashion design, basketry, painting, and textile production), and other self-expression art forms such as movement and painting. The existing research also acknowledges the growing number of women in different creative subsectors in the region as well as the growing presence and influence of women managers of creative businesses in SSA (Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; Anderson and Komba 2017; DeMotts 2017; Dzisi 2008; Frank 2002, 2007; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Jaiyeola and Adeyeye 2021; Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021; Kamara 2014; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Langevang 2017; Langevang and Gough 2012; Loots and Mbele 2020; Mathodi, Dlamini, and Matlala 2024; Mhiripiri 2011; Motsamayi 2020; Nanbigne 2003; Nwanekezi and Onyekuru 2014; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ofori 2024; Ojong 2006, 2017b; Okolo, Omorogbee, and Alufohai 2016; Oriakhogba 2020; Pereira, Shackleton, and Shackleton 2006; Ramafikeng 2016; Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017; Snowball 2016; Snowball and Hadisi 2020; Snowball and Mapuma 2020; Steedman and Brydges 2023; Verhoeven et al. 2018; Yusuf 2012).

Evident in the reviewed literature is the far-reaching ways that social media and other online technologies, as well as networking and communication tools, have revolutionized the work of women creatives in SSA. Writing specifically about female youth tweak dancers in Kenya, Kitata (2020) notes that the internet has offered an alternative outlet for suppressed dance performance needs of Kenyan youth. Regarding creative entrepreneurship, the literature also indicates an upsurge in women who market their or others' creative works, train creatives, promote and manage creative events, and prospect and negotiate contracts and businesses on behalf of creatives. Women managers of creative works are also reportedly leading efforts to modernize women's traditional creative activities and promote creative businesses in socially and environmentally sustainable ways (Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021; Langevang and Gough 2012; Loots and Mbele 2020; Mathodi, Dlamini, and Matlala 2024; Motsamayi 2020; Ofori 2024).

[1] Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS 2018:1) defines the "creative sector," as "...those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property."

[2] Traditional creative art or occupation is art or occupation that is part of a culture of a certain group of people, with skills and knowledge passed down through generations from masters to apprentices (Ratnam 2014). On the other hand, the "modern creative industry" is defined as encompassing a wide array of sectors that generate economic value through creativity, innovation, and the production of intellectual property, and shaped and influenced by the rapid advancements in technology and globalization (Božić, 2024).

According to existing research, in SSA, women currently outnumber men in artistic roles such as storytellers, singers, dancers, riddle posers, dramatists, weavers, quilt makers, producers of cultural items such as mats and hats, tailors and fashion designers, hairdressers, and jewelry and bead makers.

Judging from evidence from the review, in SSA women currently outnumber men in artistic roles including as storytellers, singers, dancers, riddle posers, dramatists, weavers, quilt makers, producers of cultural items such as mats and hats, tailors and fashion designers, hairdressers, and jewelry and bead makers (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Cohen 2023; Kamara 2014; Langevang 2017; Langevang and Gough 2012). However, women are underrepresented in leading roles as choreographers, directors, band leaders or solo artists (Kamara 2014; Katiji and Muranda 2023). Further, in both traditional and modern music industry-related activities in SSA, women creatives operate mainly as backing vocalists, singers, and dancers (Kamara 2014; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Loots and Mbele 2020). Katiji and Muranda (2023) point out, for instance, that despite the strong contribution of women in the music industry in SSA, they remain very marginal in some of the creative aspects of music such as sound and music engineering. Hadisi and Snowball (2024) noted that in South Africa, while visual arts and crafts provide critical opportunities for the employment of women and youth, it is also one of the most male-dominated subsectors, and earnings are generally lower, especially for women. Rural women creatives in SSA also continue to operate largely within visual arts and craft sector (Hadisi and Snowball 2022).

The evolving and unique role of women in shaping the region's creative sector is another important theme in the available literature (Abisuga and Fillis 2016; Bisschoff 2009, 2012; Cohen 2023; Dzisi 2008; Edgar 2023; Iwuchukwu 2017; Lekalake Plaatjie 2020; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Loots and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ofori 2024; Oriakhogba 2020; Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017; Umebinyuo 2020). More recently, there has also been a surge of women in creative writing and filmmaking in SSA, as reported by Nwanya and Ojemudia (2014a), Ofori (2024), Steedman and Brydges (2023), and Iwuchukwu (2017). Cohen (2023) writes that SSA women creatives have played pivotal roles in creating networks of exchange at both personal, national, and cross-border levels. The Liberian women she studied were instrumental in fostering interest, recognition, and demand for African products globally through their legendary quilting craft. Additionally, women creatives' presence is growing in digital fields, which equip them with essential skills for careers in creative technology and social entrepreneurship (Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017). SSA women creatives have also become a significant force in preserving and safeguarding critical traditional handicrafts forms, including weaving, pottery, and dyeing, and in reshaping the perceptions about women and gender in Africa, which are frequently distorted and misrepresented in male-dominated literature and art forms (Abisuga and Fillis 2016; Bisschoff 2009, 2012; Iwuchukwu 2017; Lekalake Plaatjie 2020; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Loots and Mbele 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014b; Ofori 2024; Pakade 2020; Umebinyuo 2020).

Pakade (2020), writing about Celeste Ntuli in South Africa, notes how she has led efforts to challenge stereotypes about standup comedy as a male terrain. Umebinyuo (2020), reflecting on her own work as a poet, writer and storyteller notes that "When I am asked why poetry is important as a medium, I understand how important it is to use whatever form I choose of storytelling to share particularized stories of women like me ... Black. African. Nigerian. Women who feel left out of stories that humanize their existence, who do not

When I am asked why poetry is important as a medium, I understand how important it is to use whatever form I choose of storytelling to share particularized stories of women like me … Black. African. Nigerian. Women who feel left out of stories that humanize their existence, who do not feel othered when they read my work'.

Umebinyuo (2020), poet, writer and storyteller

feel othered when they read my work." Focusing on the artist, Billie Zangewa of Malawi, Michna (2020) quotes her as saying, "…so it is about identity for me. I'm expressing myself and embracing my femininity through my choice of material…I find relief in it."

Working as a creative is not only a vital source of income and empowerment for women and their households (DeMotts 2017; Dzisi 2008; Frank 2002, 2007; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Jaiyeola and Adeyeye 2021; Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021, 2021; Kamara 2014; Langevang 2017; Langevang and Gough 2012; Mathodi, Dlamini, and Matlala 2024; Motsamayi 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ojong 2006, 2017b; Oriakhogba 2020; Pereira, Shackleton, and Shackleton 2006; Rogerson 2006; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Snowball 2016; Snowball and Hadisi 2020; Snowball and Mapuma 2020; Verhoeven et al. 2018), but it is also a route to prominence, a means for identity expression, and a source of pride (Bisschoff 2009, 2012; Frank 2002; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Loots and Mbele 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ofori 2024; Oriakhogba 2020; Pakade 2020; Umebinyuo 2020; Verhoeven et al. 2018). Research in South Africa (Hadisi and Snowball 2022) and Zimbabwe (Verhoeven et al. 2018), shows that women creatives have achieved local fame and social validation for their arts and crafts, and have also seen some of their work exhibited or sold internationally.

Further, the works of African women creatives have contributed both to debates and dialogues about pressing social and development problems as well as their self-liberation and independence, reconstruction of the image and identity of women, and capacity to challenge the status quo and explode myths and silences about women in the region (Bisschoff 2009, 2012; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Oda 2005; Ofori 2024). Through their work, the region's women creatives have called attention to societal ills as demonstrated by Loots et al. (2020), who note that the works of SSA's women creatives have addressed terrorism, taboos, gender-based violence, corruption, exclusion, state failure, racism, ethnicity, and poverty, among other topical issues in the region. Bisschoff (2009, 2012) also asserts that although female directors are hugely underrepresented in West African filmmaking, the last two decades have seen an increasing number of women in francophone West Africa directing their own films, rising in fame and reputation, and focusing on issues that are important to women. According to Ofori (2024), women in cinema production in Nigeria regularly use their storytelling skills to challenge stereotypes, foster cross-cultural understanding, and promote gender equality, emerging as catalysts for inclusive and equitable representation in the cinematic landscape.

Women creatives' journeys

While research on African women's creative journeys is scant, the available evidence indicates that SSA women's paths into and through the creative sector are as diverse as the women themselves. Generally, as many writers suggest, women in SSA can enter creative careers through intergenerational transfer of skills (through family members such as parents, grandparents, or other elder relatives), informal networks and apprenticeship, self-discovery, formal education, and community learning (Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; DeMotts 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Jokia et al., 2021; Loots and Mbele 2020; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014; Edgar, 2023; Oda 2005; Ojong, 2006, 2017; Pakade 2020; Pereira, Shackleton, and Shackleton

2006; Ramafikeng 2016; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Motsamayi et al. (2024); Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017; Steedman and Brydges 2023; Umebinyuo 2020; Cohen 2023; Frank 2002, 2007; Iwuchukwu 2017; Mbanda 2020).

The creative careers of women in the region can also follow from informal and formal apprenticeship and training involving professional studies, creative club membership (e.g., coding and drama clubs), film schools, online courses, internships, and informal traineeship programs (Iwuchukwu 2017; Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Steedman and Brydges 2023; Jokia et al. 2021). In rural Zimbabwe, women in pottery and batik dyeing often acquire their skills through community-based learning, where more experienced artisans informally mentor younger women (Verhoeven et al., 2018).

Economic hardship and livelihood challenges contribute to women's pursuit of careers as creatives in Africa (Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; Anderson and Mdemu Komba 2017; DeMotts 2017; Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021; Langevang and Gough 2012; Oda 2005; Ojong 2006; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Steedman and Brydges 2023). For example, Langevang and Gough (2012) indicate that women in Ghana take up hairstyling and tailoring as a survival tactic. In their study of the economic actions and entrepreneurial behavior of creative entrepreneurs operating in precarious situations, Alacovska et al. (2021) argue that poverty and widespread economic uncertainty contribute to women's choice of some creative professions.

Networking and networks play a key part in women's creative journeys in SSA. They provide opportunities and platforms for women creatives to connect, share resources, receive mentorship, acquire skills, access markets, and gain support from peers, leaders, and stakeholders in the industry (DeMotts 2017; Edgar 2023; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Ojong 2017a; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Yusuf 2012). These networks may comprise family members, women's groups and organizations, friends, guilds and cooperatives, or local and online communities (Frank 2002; Kamara 2015; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Oriakhogba 2020). In rural Zulu communities, women creatives rely on traditional and communal ties to collaborate on craft production and hone their skills. Yusuf (2012) writes that in Nigeria, women artisans depend on networks to seek new products, latest designs, and raw materials. In Zimbabwe, women in craft production rely on their cooperatives to finance and expand their business (Verhoeven et al., 2018). Reliance on social networks for information and resources establishes tightly knit support systems that facilitate the pooling of resources, access to markets, training, clientele, tools, raw material, and skills, as well as product marketing, while also helping the women to navigate other professional challenges in the sector (Oriakhogba 2020; Jaiyeola and Adeyeye 2021; Verhoeven et al. 2018).

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Available literature recognizes the role of feminist networks and organizations in supporting the creative journeys of women in Africa through, among others, establishing and nurturing platforms or curated events, festivals for creative performances, spaces for dialogue, collaborations, networking, and identity formation among women creatives (Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021; Kamara 2014; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Loots and Mbele 2020; Motsamayi 2020; Steedman and Brydges 2023). Jokia et al. (2021) argue that training opportunities organized

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by feminist organizations have enabled women art and craft entrepreneurs to acquire the skills they need to generate income. Further, an artistic literacy training forum for women creatives in South Africa supported them to "initiate and run projects...share expertise, innovative ideas, and artistic interests with colleagues" (Motsamayi, 2020, 11). The forum also offered space for women to share skills and knowledge, overcome gender-related challenges, and expand their social and professional networks (Motsamayi et al. 2024; Motsamayi 2020). Also, in a study by Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele (2020), women playwrights in the region praised the African Women Playwrights Network for offering them a platform to publish their plays and anthologies.

Authors (such as Jaiyeola and Adeyeye 2021; Jokia et al. 2021; and Kamara 2015) suggest that while several women receive support, training, or mentorship to launch and grow their careers, others cultivate their skills autonomously by experimenting with various materials and techniques. Research (by Okolo et al. 2016; Pereira et al. 2006; Steedman and Brydges 2021; and Oda 2005) shows that women creatives in the region also often participate in different facets of their own enterprises. For example, hairstylists in Ghana provide services and run the financial side of their salons, which can involve juggling professional and domestic duties simultaneously (Oda 2005). Newer creative industries, like filmmaking and fashion design, more overtly incorporate multiple identities; that is, a woman may at once be the creator and entrepreneur taking on multiple projects, from social justice documentaries to corporate work, while managing their creative business on their own (Steedman and Brydges, 2021).

Challenges of women creatives in sub-Saharan Africa

Systemic and structural barriers, societal expectations, unsupportive policy contexts, male control of creative sector infrastructure, cultural biases, and gender inequities and prejudices are among the challenges faced by women creatives in SSA (Ansell 2024; Bisschoff 2012; Duignan-Pearson 2019; Dzisi 2008; Frank 2002; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Jaga et al. 2018; Kaburire and Msoka 2024; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Ofori 2024; Sika 2025; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022; Snowball and Hadisi 2020; Umebinyuo 2020; Verhoeven et al. 2018). These challenges manifest in multiple ways and have implications for the growth, advancement, workplace satisfaction, and work conditions of women creatives (Frank 2002; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Verhoeven et al. 2018). For instance, across the region, men own or control most of the creative sector infrastructure (such as universities, cinema houses, training institutes, studios, film production and book publishing companies, and other creative businesses), putting women creatives at the mercy of these powerful male figures (Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; Ansell 2024; Bisschoff 2012; Duignan-Pearson 2019; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Ofori 2024; Steedman and Brydges 2023).

A commonly reported challenge for African women creatives is gender pay gap. Though equally skilled, versatile, and educated, it is not uncommon for women creatives to earn less than their male counterparts for similar work or roles (Adelinah 2016; De Motts 2017; Ojong 2017; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Ansell 2024; Abisuga and Fillis 2016; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Langevang 2017; Marina and Nkemdili 2024; Motsamayi et al. 2024, Hadisi and Snowball, 2022; Jaga et al. 2018; Frank 2002; Anaesoronye 2021). For instance, Nigeria's Inkblot Women in Film, an association of women in Nigeria's film industry, observed that male supporting actors sometimes get paid more than female lead actors (Anaesoronye 2021). Women creatives are also often frequently relegated to less profitable roles even when they have equivalent educational backgrounds and experience as men (Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Ansell 2024). They also experience unfair compensation for their work, particularly where informal networks dictate market rates and job opportunities (Eikhof and Warhurst 2013). In such situations, women creatives are often forced to accept lower wages or unpaid work in hopes of prospects or recognition. Snowball (2016) notes that in creative sub-sectors, where market volatility and consumer demand heavily influence income levels, women creatives tend to be paid less than they are worth. Overall, as Jaga et al. (2018) assert, women in creative industries face slower career progression, lower pay, and limited access to leadership positions than their male counterparts.

Women creatives in the region also experience minimal job security due to their overrepresentation in informal or freelance creative roles which have irregular incomes and work schedules, and may lack formal contracts (Hadisi and Snowball, 2022; Snowball, 2016; Verhoeven et al., 2018). For instance, women in bead- and pottery-making in Zimbabwe report that their incomes are highly contingent on market demand, which can be unpredictable and inconsistent (Verhoeven et al., 2018). Creative activities such hairstyling, handicrafts, fashion-designing, and the movie and film making industry are also increasingly competitive, which often makes it difficult for women to make a decent living on incomes from their creativity alone (Oda 2005). Women

craft makers in the region often lack access to non-traditional markets and experience seasonality, which limits their economic returns (Pereira et al. 2006). Women, particularly, rural women in creative occupations, also often contend with limited access to resources, opportunities, training, and markets, with potentially damaging impacts on their incomes as well as creative expression and potential (De Motts 2017; Rogerson and Sithole 2001, Ojong 2006).

Gender-based discriminations against women creatives in Africa is not limited to pay inequality. Women creatives also suffer a lack of recognition for their contributions, and in some creative settings or contexts, their works are valued less than men's.

Gender-based inequities against women creatives in Africa are not limited to pay inequality. Women also suffer a lack of recognition for their contributions, and in some creative settings or contexts, their works are valued less than men's (Chitando and Mateveke 2012; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Langevang 2017; Marina and Nkemdili 2024; Mhiripiri 2011; Motsamayi et al. 2024; Nanhigne 2003; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014; Ojong, 2017). In parts of SSA, women are culturally forbidden from participating in some creative activities, such as weaving, carving, sculpture, leading men in dances, and playing certain instruments such as drums, xylophone, and horns, thereby limiting their participation in local creative events and activities (Boateng 2007; Nanbigne 2003). In Ghana, Boateng (2007:10-11) asserts that "the gender of cloth production is quite stable since men almost exclusively produce kente and adinkra cloth. Taboos reinforce this male dominance by threatening women with barrenness if they practice these crafts. Further, the prestigious status of both adinkra and kente translates into social and economic advantages for men." Nwanya and Ojemudia (2014) and Moelwyn-Hughes (2013) suggest that in many artistic subsectors in SSA, the creative persona is constituted as a masculine subject, which hinders women from engaging and flourishing in such subsectors. Women participating in these "male-identified" creative genres are fiercely regulated and surveyed at several intersections (Moelwyn-Hughes 2013).

Gender biases in the attribution of artistic and creative works increase the lack of recognition for female creatives by obscuring their artistic identities behind those of their male counterparts, reducing their visibility and career chances (Boateng 2007). In some instances, gender-based discrimination results in the bypassing of women for training opportunities out of concern that they will get married, become pregnant and abandon an assignment or role (Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022). Ghanaian broadcaster Akua Sika recently wrote about her experience of being sidelined, despite her education and expertise, from prime-time slots based on gender stereotypes by male managers who regarded drive-time as "men's territory"(Sika 2025). Writing specifically about women DJs and performers, including stand-up comedians in Africa, GIZ (2023) reports that these women endure increased scrutiny, discrimination, and doubt about their technical talents or ability to command a crowd. Such biases raise questions and doubt about the technical talents or ability of these creatives, making it difficult for them to find jobs or establish themselves in the sector (Ansell 2024; Moelwyn-Hughes 2013; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022).

Another manifestation of gender bias in the sector in SSA is the reported reluctance or refusal of some men to be directed or managed by a woman in some creative settings (Iwuchukwu 2017). Relating the case of the acclaimed female Nigerian playwright Sofola, Iwuchukwu (2017) describes her experience directing actors on stage during which some of the male actors resisted being instructed by her or purposefully chose to frustrate her efforts or ruin her production, either through outright confrontational disobedience or by carrying out

instructions incorrectly. In yet another case reported by Iwuchukwu (2017), male colleagues denied a female university teacher in the region the opportunity to stage her play. They also slandered her second play, accusing it of "contaminating and stinking up" the theater.

Further, negative perceptions surround women artists and creatives such as dancers, musicians, hairdressers, and actresses in the region. These creatives are frequently depicted as available for sex, prostitutes, and "sexually decadent persons" (Kamara 2015; Ansell 2024; Iwuchukwu 2017; Ojong 2006; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014). Women in some of these creative careers often lack family and social support to continue in such professions, particularly after marriage (Kamara 2015). Katiji and Muranda (2023, p. 206) observed that "the Zimbabwe music industry has lost some amazing talent that got stifled after marriage." Most of these discriminatory practices feed into and sustain the continuing stigmatization and negative portrayal of women in technology, innovation, and other science-related creative activities (Sibande and Chilongoshi, 2017).

Sexual and gender-based harassment and exploitation against women creatives also frequently take the form of cyberbullying, gossiping, rumor-spreading, trolling, and body shaming (Ansell 2024; Ntoele and Atouguia 2017; Oreoluwa et al. 2024; Sika 2025). Unwanted verbal comments and jokes, coercive attempts to initiate a sexual relationship, or "quid pro quo" harassment, in which sexual compliance is a condition for jobs or roles, are regular experiences for several of SSA's female creatives (Sika 2025; Smith,

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Louw, and Motara 2022). Available evidence indicates that powerful, often male directors, managers, and entrepreneurs in the sector sexually harass female creatives, ask young female musicians to dress and dance more provocatively to get concert opportunities, refuse female creatives financial and other support for their work, or pressure them into predatory management contracts (Ansell 2024; GIZ 2023; Sika 2025).

Research in South Africa has documented harassment of hairdressers, particularly migrant hairdressers, by police and men who see them as vulnerable and lacking power or state protection, and therefore sexually available (Matsipa 2017). In Nigeria, Oreoluwa et al. (2024) found pervasive online harassment of women journalists including unwanted sexual advances, rape and death threats, as well as intimidation, heightened surveillance, impersonation, and other digital dangers. These abuses and threats have led some of the region's female creatives to abandon their creative careers or the use of social media (Iwuchukwu 2017; Kamara 2014; Katiji and Muranda 2023; Matsipa 2017; Ntoele and Atouguia 2017; Oreoluwa et al. 2024; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022; Tlelima 2022). Hunt and colleagues (2019) who studied South African and Kenyan women creative workers, such as home beauty care providers who rely on "gig work" platforms, found that many of them felt that the platforms did not sufficiently vet clients and that even when they complained about mistreatment by a client, no further action was taken. Hunt et.al (2019) report that some of the women beauty workers "automatically rejected all requests from male clients (due to fear of harassment).Writing specifically about women musicians and DJs in SSA, Ansell (2024) and Smith, Louw, and Motara (2022) detailed experiences of pervasive micro-aggressions such as inappropriate remarks, "mansplaining" (having their ideas ignored until repeated by a man), being given titles without the power required to do the job properly, being asked irrelevant, gender-related questions during interviews, and being asked to perform

gendered, non-music work such as catering during band rehearsals. At employment and on tours, many of these creatives reportedly have no privacy to change into stage clothing and are sometimes expected to share rooms with male co-players unless they pay for their own room. Ansell (2024) further notes that paying for safe transport and separate rooms have become South Africa's music industry's own "pink" tax—the additional costs of simply being a woman—which also include investment in appearance and attire to conform to the policing male gaze. However, while sexual harassment and abuse is extensive in some creative sectors, fears of retaliation or harm to their careers deter women from reporting such incidents, perpetuating a culture of silence (Ansell 2024; Ntoele and Atouguia 2017; Sika 2025; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022).

Limited access to education, information, training, and entrepreneurial skills are also widely reported challenges for women creatives in SSA (Kamara 2015; Langevang and Gough 2012; Oda 2005; Edgar 2023; Yusuf 2012; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Kaburire and Msoka, 2014; Langevang, 2017; Motsamayi, 2020; Marina and Nkemdili, 2024). Oda (2005) and Langevang and Gough (2012) found a preponderance of women creatives with little or no formal education in activities such as hairdressing, fashion or tailoring, and arts and crafts. In South Africa, 94% of women creatives reportedly required training in entrepreneurial skills, 97% required communication skills, and 97% required negotiating and networking skills. Low level education and limited skills were the most cited reason among these creatives for avoiding paperwork and registration processes for their business (Jokia, Swanepoel, and Venter 2021). In the handicraft industry in Tanzania, Kaburire and Msoka (2024) found that men fared better than women creatives with regards to product development information or knowledge and market accessibility due largely to gender roles.

Many women creatives in SSA struggle to work and thrive due to limited access to financial resources (Jokia et al. 2021; Kamara 2015; Edgar 2023; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Jaga et al., 2018; Nyawo and Mubangizi 2015; Okolo et al. 2016; Pereira et al. 2006; Steedman and Brydges 2021; Kaburire and Msoka 2024; Dzisi 2008). Motsamayi (2020) reports that women creatives and creative entrepreneurs have a harder time than their male counterparts in obtaining credit facilities from banks. Langevang's (2017) study of women in the fashion industry in Ghana, Uganda, and Zambia showed that largely due to limited resources to finance and scale up their businesses, most young women creatives failed in their first year of business, and even those who survived remained as a one-woman business. Similar findings have been reported about women in craftmaking in South Africa (Nyawo and Mubangizi 2015), migrant women creatives (Jaga et al. 2018), and rural and indigenous women creatives (Dzisi 2008).

In addition to dealing with long and unpredictable work schedules, including working late and risky hours, women creatives in SSA frequently have to balance professional jobs and positions with household duties and obligations including childcare (Langevang 2017; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020). Iwuchukwu's (2017) study of women playwrights suggested that while some took their children to rehearsals, others

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Poor governmental support, weak policy guidelines, and limited institutional support to women creatives are widely reported barriers for women in the creative sector.

were forced to wait to write after their children were grown and able to fend for themselves. There were also those who took a long break after their marriage or gave up their marriage to concentrate on their careers. Other challenges include low self-esteem as well as the marginalization of rural and disabled women (Motsamayi 2020), globalization, and competition from artistic products that are increasingly being mass-produced (Langevang and Gough 2012; Mathodi, Dlamini, and Matlala 2024; Motsamayi 2020; Tapfuma, Musavengane, and Magwaza 2024), and safety and security risks when working late hours or traveling alone (Duignan-Pearson 2019). Female DJs, for example, report safety concerns, including hijackings or assaults, when commuting to and from performances in South Africa, limiting their movement and access to opportunities, and adding anxiety to their work (Ansell 2024; Duignan-Pearson 2019; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022).

Poor governmental support, weak policy guidelines, and limited institutional support to women creatives are widely reported barriers for women in the creative sector (Okolo et al. 2016; Pereira et al. 2006; Steedman and Brydges 2021; Hadisi and Snowball 2022; Jaga et al. 2018; Dzisi 2008). The lack of government and institutional support for women in creative fields hinders them from accessing business capital and larger, more profitable markets, leaving them confined to local or regional markets with limited growth potential, and struggling with inadequate capital, difficulties obtaining raw materials, and low prices (Mkenda and Aikaeli 2019). In South Africa, as Matsipa (2014) notes, city authorities and police rely on environmental and traffic laws to harass street-based women creatives, such as hairstylists, pedicurists, and manicurists. Iwuchukwu (2017) also reports that many publishers do not invest in women playwrights, forcing them to resort to self-publishing which reduces their reach, readership, and recognition in the field.

How women creatives manage their work-related challenges

Women creatives use a combination of advocacy, community support, and personal initiative or agency to deal with the difficulties they face at work. Some women leverage their creative skills and energies to confront the prejudice and stereotypes that hold them back and disregard their potential and achievement, and to re-imagine women as powerful and liberated characters (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Bisschoff 2012; Cassiman 2022; Chitando 2020; Edgar 2023; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Mbanda 2020; Mhiripiri 2011; Nwafor 2022; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ofori 2024; Umebinyuo 2020). In a study of female musicians in Zimbabwe, Chitando and Mateveke (2012) showed that they use their music and talent to speak out against oppressive gender norms and assert themselves as capable and worthy creatives, a point which Cassiman (2022) also makes about women creatives in Ghana. Women creatives also often use artistic innovations and products that help them stand out in the market and establish a niche for themselves. According to Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis (2016), women handicraft makers in Africa are incorporating indigenous styles in their businesses, which keeps business costs low and improves the appeal and uniqueness of their products (Abisuga and Fillis 2016). Edgar (2023) found “purpose” to be the primary driver of artisan social enterprises in Zambia, with female leadership a critical factor.

Women creatives also confront the challenges they face through use of social media platforms to

Among women creatives, networking is a key strategy for fostering collective action against some of their challenges. This includes building alliances with other creatives, forming women-only guilds and cooperatives, and working with family members and organizations that support women creatives.

build networks, speak out about discrimination or other gendered injustices in the sector, advocate for change, address barriers to their progress, acquire skills, improve their access to resources and markets, and seek recognition (Langevang 2017; Mhandu 2020; Kamara 2015; Motsamayi 2020; Motsamayi et al. 2024; Steedman and Brydges 2021; Pereira et al. 2006; Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017). Women creatives also exercise agency by seeking training opportunities to attain skills and competencies to launch their enterprises, expand their skill sets, and adapt to new social and other technologies, ensuring their relevance in a rapidly evolving sector (Adelinah 2016; De Motts 2017; Ojong 2006; Rogerson and Sithole 2001, Motsamayi 2020; Motsamayi et al. 2024; Loots and Mbele 2020). For instance, Motsamayi (2020) and Motsamayi et al. (2024) showed that many women creatives in SSA are using social media technologies, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to address their lack of access to critical information, develop skills, support each other, and advertise and sell their goods and services.

Women creatives' use of social media resources has also helped them cut out intermediaries who reduce their profit margins. Steedman and Brydges (2021) found that difficulties in navigating established markets have led some African women fashion designers and filmmakers to seek new and fresh markets for their goods. Some women creatives have leveraged social media to generate funding and capital for their work and to directly reach their clients and fans to promote their products and skills (Steedman and Brydges 2021; Adelinah 2016; Rogerson and Sithole 2001; Sibande and Chilongoshi 2017). Some women craft-makers are also growing the plants they use in the work in their own gardens to

improve access to resources which were previously controlled by others or difficult to obtain (Pereira et al., 2006).

Among women creatives, networking is a key strategy for fostering collective action against some of their challenges. This includes building alliances with other creatives, forming women-only guilds and cooperatives, and working with family members and organizations that support women creatives (Akinbogun and Ogunduyile 2009; Brogan and Dooley 2024; Mathodi, Dlamini, and Matlala 2024; Motsamayi 2020; Nanbigne 2003; Ntoele and Atouguia 2017; Nwafor 2022). As an aspect of strategic networking, women creative collectives have used resource pooling and crowdfunding to generate funds and launch new products (Steedman and Brydges 2021; Brogan and Dooley 2024).

Women creatives have also used networking to develop social capital that transcends their local and national boundaries and serves to expand their resources, mentorship opportunities, and markets, enabling them to tackle structural and systemic barriers effectively (Brogan and Dooley 2024). In South Africa, Duignan-Pearson (2019) notes that female DJs established the S.H.E network, an all-female creatives networking platform to share resources, hone their skills, boost their confidence, exchange experiences, provide mentorship and training, nurture the next generation of DJs, and combat the traditional gatekeeping that restricts access to gigs and performance spaces. Graduates of the FUSE program run by female DJs in South Africa have achieved notable success, highlighting the transformative impact of networks for women creatives' professional journeys (Duignan-Pearson 2019).

Other coping strategies that African women creatives use include advocacy against unfair creative workplace practices, such as unequal compensation and poor working conditions (Chitando 2020; Duignan-Pearson 2019; Iwuchukwu 2017; Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Steedman and Brydges 2023; Umebinyuo 2020); reliance on family members for support, including help with childcare duties (Motsamayi et al. 2024); combining their creative work with other more regular employment; and keeping their businesses small and informal (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Alacovska, Langevang, and Steedman 2021; Steedman and Brydges 2023; Van Eeden 2011). There are also reports of women leaving the industry due to gender-based challenges to pursue other livelihoods (Iwuchukwu 2017) or staying silent and enduring abuses in the industry (Kamara 2015; Katiji and Miranda 2023).

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Discussion

Africa's creative sector offers enormous potential for job creation, wealth generation, and economic transformation (Franco and Njogu 2020; Leke and Yeboah-Amankwah 2018). However, the industry faces significant obstacles that prevent it from reaching its full potential. One of these challenges is gender inequity. This scoping review synthesizes existing research and knowledge regarding women creatives in Africa to inform future research as well as policy and programmatic action.

The work, lives, and experiences of African women creatives are underexplored in the literature. Less is written on these topics in comparison to many other areas such as older women's lives, unpaid women's care challenges, adolescent girls' health, and women's empowerment issues generally. In the scant available literature on women creatives however, a few major issues emerge. A common thread in the reviewed studies is the strong and growing presence and contribution of women in both traditional and modern creative sectors and occupations in SSA, particularly visual and performing arts, photography, writing, poetry, music, hairstyling, craftmaking, fashion design, and textile production. There is also evidence that most women creatives in SSA work in roles that pay less than males because of historic structural barriers to women's access to higher education and skills as well as decades of sexist norms, regulations, and work practices that continue to undervalue women's labor and reproduce 'inequality regimes' in the creative workplace as in other settings (Acker 2006). As demonstrated in several studies (Ansell 2024; Bisschoff

2009; Duignan-Pearson 2019; Nwanya and Ojemudia 2014a; Ofori 2024; Smith, Louw, and Motara 2022), the creative persona in SSA continues to be frequently constructed as a masculine subject, which can hinder women from engaging and flourishing in creative industries.

Judging from the available literature, creative work is not only a vital source of income and empowerment for women and their households, but it is also a means through which women creatives resist social and development challenges including terrorism, taboos, gender-based violence, corruption, inequality, exclusion, state failure, racism, ethnicity, and poverty among other topical issues in the region. Iwuchukwu (2017) suggests that the creative sector in Africa offers a unique and invaluable avenue for women to earn livelihoods and express themselves, challenge societal norms, and promote empowerment. As women harness the power of creative expression to tell their stories, advocate for gender equality, and inspire change, the sector and society at large can become more inclusive and equitable.

Individual women creatives' pathways to and through the sector are as diverse as the women themselves. Women creatives learn and hone their creative skills through family members, informal and formal networks, apprenticeship, self-discovery, formal education, and community learning. The multiple paths of the creative journeys of women creatives have different implications for their growth, resilience, retention, experience, and capacity to fully benefit from the promises of the sector. Loeffen (2016) and Swann (2014) note that women's professional journeys and trajectories are shaped by many factors, each of which has great implications for their work outcomes and experiences. For instance, while formal education can build professional and creative skill and reputations, lack of access to strong networks can affect progression by hindering access to social connections, mentorship, and partnerships (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, and Uzzi 2000; Kleihauer, Stephens, and Hart 2012). Further, emerging evidence that economic hardship and livelihood challenges contribute to women's resorting to careers as creatives in Africa is important and shows the vast employment opportunities of the sector. However, it also suggests the widespread precarity under which many women creatives operate and the need for policies to support them.

Systemic and institutional constraints, male control of creative sector infrastructure, cultural expectations, unsupportive policy frameworks, and deeply rooted gender stereotypes are among the many obstacles that women creatives in SSA must overcome. These challenges result in job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, irregular incomes and work schedules, limited recognition for women creatives, and the bypassing of women for opportunities and roles in the sector. Women creatives also experience sexual harassment and abuse, lack of family and social support, bullying and trolling, police harassment, limited access to training and financial resources, and poor governmental support, and several of them juggle domestic and professional responsibilities. In some of the region's creative sub-sectors, global-

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ization is also resulting in the influx of mass-produced artistic products that are now competing with women creatives' efforts.

Literature on women and work is replete with implications of the identified challenges for women's capacity to flourish in work and thrive as professionals. Many of the gender-based challenges and inequities that women face in other industries and sectors are also present in the creative industry (Aborisade and Ariyo 2023; Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Botha 2016; Tiwari, Mathur, and Awasthi 2018). Abaga (2021) writes that women's participation in the creative sector is hampered by gender inequality, including gender-insensitive workplace and industry practices that undervalue women creatives, and creative settings that devalue them and offer less than the talent they bring. In Uganda for instance, evidence indicates that many businesses, including creative ventures, are unregistered, which exposes employees, particularly women and girls, to abusive and poor working conditions (Okafor 2023). Generally, across Africa, the creative sector suffers from limited policy-relevant research, gender and other inequities, restricted space for expression, and insufficient labor rights protections (Loots, Hutchison, and Mbele 2020; Ntoele and Atouguia 2017; Snowball and Mapuma 2020; Steedman and Brydges 2023). Stifling women creatives' capacity to work on their own terms in the sector, these barriers and challenges result in slow progression, work dissatisfaction, lack of capacity to expand businesses, feeling of helplessness, and career exits and interruptions (Iwuchukwu 2017).

Women creatives rely on advocacy, social networks, family and community support, and agency to deal with the difficulties they face at work. In addition to using their creative skills and energies to confront challenges, women creatives in Africa also proactively seek training opportunities to attain critical skills and competencies, use social media resources to crowdfund or navigate other work-related challenges, and network with other women creatives. However, evidence also suggests that some of them stay silent and endure abuse and marginalization, rely on family and community members for support including help with childcare duties, discontinue or suspend their careers out of frustration and lack of support, or combine their creative work with other more regular employment. While some of the positive strategies are effective in helping the region's women creatives navigate the challenges they face, the maladaptive strategies can prevent women creatives from actualizing their full potential or benefiting fully from prospects in the sector (Rao, Apte, and Subbakrishna 2003).

Women creatives rely on advocacy, social networks, family and community support, and agency to deal with the difficulties they face at work. In addition to using their creative skills and energies to confront the challenges they face, women creatives in Africa also agentively seek training opportunities to attain critical skills and competencies, use social media resources to crowdfund or navigate other workrelated challenges, and network with other women creatives.

The Way Forward

The creative industry has emerged as a significant driver of innovation, growth, and employment in SSA. Throughout the region, the industry employs millions of people, creates innovations, solves problems, educates, entertains, informs, and contributes to economic development and community well-being (Muchira 2023). Growth in the creative sector overflows into other industries, creates new jobs, and brings new ideas, products and ways of working (UNCTAD n.d.). Women are making critical strides in the creative sector in SSA, contributing to these innovations, leading change in the sector, and advancing development efforts in the region.

However, despite the growing importance of the industry in Africa and the numerous contributions of women, the work lives and experiences of women creatives in the region have received little attention. The multifaceted challenges that female creatives encounter, as well as their ways for coping with them, highlight the need for more strategic policy and programmatic responses.

Based on the review findings, some potential areas of action for the sector's many stakeholders include:

Establish a formal research agenda on women creatives in the region. The region's universities and research institutes must take the lead in developing and implementing a robust sector research agenda on women in the sector to build on current research and evidence. Such an agenda will be crucial for understanding the contributions, challenges, and possibilities of different women groups across various creative industries. It will also assist in influencing policies, empowering creatives, and achieving inclusive economic development.

Within this research agenda, targeted ongoing research should consider the following:

- Little has been written about the circumstances and experiences of women creatives in several creative sub-sectors such as architecture, video games, museums and galleries, product and graphic design, advertising, and many others. Research in these subsectors is needed to understand the full scope of discrimination and exclusion against women creatives in the region.
- Research should delve into identified issues such as gender wage discrimination, dangerous working conditions, sexual abuse and harassment, and limited access to financial support, and disaggregate evidence on women's experiences and challenges by age, educational attainment, location, sub-sector, and other criteria. Findings could then be used to better hone strategies to guide policy action.
- More research is needed to better understand how gender interacts with other factors which may affect the experiences and outcomes for women in the sector.
- There is also a need for research on the socioeconomic costs of gender inequity in the sector. Such research will be crucial in designing policies and initiatives to increase women's participation and benefits in the sector.

Develop more women-focused sector-specific interventions and programs to address some of the difficulties associated with mentorship, skill development, workplace safety, and market and funding access. For example, guilds, creative firms, and creatives' associations and networks can develop and implement workplace gender charters, training, and advocacy to address some of the gender-based biases, abuses, and discriminatory practices that women creatives encounter at work. Creative sector financiers—ranging from banks and investors to development partners and cultural funds— are also pivotal in building an inclusive business environment for creatives in Africa. They need to develop flexible, creative-specific financing instruments that are gender-responsive to address the persistent issue of women creatives' limited access to business capital. Other areas where they are well-positioned to support women creatives include business and legal literacy training, investment in digital, physical, and IP infrastructure, advocacy for policy shaping and ecosystem-building, and the development of women creative-friendly due diligence business processes.

Similarly African states also need to focus more attention on gender-inclusive strategies and governance of the creative sector; gender-targeted grants, loans, and investment schemes; inclusive hubs; digital access; and mobility solutions, as well as training, mentorship, and entrepreneurial support for women creatives. States also can play an important role in strengthening rights and safety protections, anti-harassment laws, cultural rights, market access, visibility, and export support, and in establishing frameworks for gender-disaggregated data and impact measurement for the sector.

As a whole, the creative industries are more productive and meaningful when they include people from all different backgrounds, with different skills and personalities, and when they raise up voices that are not often heard (Discover Creative Careers n.d.). In SSA, the creative sector is at risk of leaving women creatives behind due to insufficient research evidence on their works and lives in the sector, ineffective and poor policies, and the scarcity of platforms that can promote and advance their interest and meaningful engagement in the sector. Generally, as Ferreira (2024) notes, a credible growth trajectory can be created in SSA's creative industry through improved governance, addressing persistent inequality, and the expansion of public initiatives through creative intermediaries, including guilds and networks.

The creative industries are more productive and meaningful when they include people from all different backgrounds, with different skills and personalities, and when they raise up voices that are not often heard.

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