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## Africa Week 2023

### HSG Alumni - Focus on Africa

Interview from HSG Alumni with Dr. Kebene Wodajo, Senior Research Fellow and lecturer at the Institute for Business Ethics of the University of St.Gallen. She researches and teaches at the intersection of BHR, technology and law.

**Dear Dr. Kejala Wodajo, can you please tell us a little bit about yourself, where do you come from and where did you undertake your studies?**

I am from Ethiopia. I was raised and studied up to my undergrad in Ethiopia. My bachelor's is in Law from Mekelle University. Following that, I did my first Master's in LL.M in International Law in China (Wuhan University) and then I did my second triple Master's degree in European Law and Economics (LL.M, MA, LL.M) at Ghent University, University of Hamburg with the University of California at Berkeley, and University of Aix-Marseille. For my PhD, I majored in international law with a research focus on multinational corporations' accountability at Shanghai Jiaotong University.

**Why did you choose the University of St. Gallen as a workplace? What attracted you to St. Gallen and especially to the University of St. Gallen?**

Primarily the Business and Human Rights focused research at the Institute for Business Ethics under the supervision of Prof. Florian Wettstein and the Competence Center for African Research at the Institute were among the main reasons for my interest in HSG. Moreover, as an emerging scholar researching at the intersection of business and human rights, law and technology, HSG provides an excellent academic environment with flexibility that allows a space for interdisciplinary research and scholarship.

**Could you give us an insight or overview of what kind of research and teaching the University of St. Gallen undertakes with the focus on the African Continent?**

There are interesting Africa-focused research, courses and initiatives at HSG. For example, the Competence Center for African Research at the Institute for Business Ethics is key in facilitating Africa-focused interdisciplinary courses that are given under the contextual studies program. The Center invites visiting lecturers and professors from the Continent for a short stay, during which they deliver lectures on different topics related to Africa. Topics covered so far include African philosophy, literature, and rights-focused subjects such as the right to development, food security and business and human rights in Africa. In terms of research, there are several research agendas directly and indirectly linked to Africa, such as

studies on the responsibility of businesses for past injustice and in contemporary settings, the rights to health and sustainable development and responsibilities in the context of emerging technologies. There are also interdisciplinary courses taught by researchers and scholars based at HSG, for example, Corporate Responsibility in sub-Saharan Africa and Afro-centric perspective to justice and human rights in cyberspace. These are not exhaustive lists, but to just mention a few examples.

It is also important to mention the important role of student led initiatives such as Africa Day and Summit in facilitating conversation around Africa at HSG.

### **Why do you think research and teaching with focus on the African Continent is important at the University of St. Gallen?**

HSG is a leading Business school across Europe which means it is a key institution that produces future business leaders who will play a decisive role in shaping, guiding and transforming the interface between business and society. Africa, on the other hand, is one of the leading destinations or host regions of large business entities. These two positionalities – HSG as an intellectual hub of tomorrow's business leaders and Africa as a resources and geographical hub of large business entities – make it essential that students and researchers at HSG pay attention to the role of business in the Continent. Notably, the adverse impact of business activities in regions such as Africa makes it a matter of necessity that corporate ethics and, at a minimum human rights observance expected from businesses are integrated into the education and research activities of institutions such as universities. I believe that HSG is well positioned to realize this.

In addition, HSG aspires to be a leading international university but has not yet fully developed a systematic focus on the African continent. At the same time, the African continent is developing very dynamically and scholarship on Africa will gain an importance in the future. Considering this, It is indeed the time to systematically build a focus on Africa in order to be well prepared for when those discussions will really take off.

### **In your research, you also focus on different forms of direct, indirect and structural digital violence. What kind of violence are (young) people confronted with online today?**

My research on structural injustice in the digital space attempts to distinguish between the perceived and reported digital harm and the systemic harms that inherently are linked not only with the digital space but to the underlying social and institutional structures that allow the normalization of inequalities and marginalization. For example, issues such as patriarchy, racism and intersectional injustices are experienced by people due to their gender identity, socio-economic status, ethnic identity and the combination of all expos groups of people in a vulnerable position to a disproportionately high risk in the digital space. Young people are among the most vulnerable groups exposed to multifaceted risks in the digital space. Some young people, while having access to the material resource to make use of the digital space, are simultaneously exposed to hypervisibility and the unfiltered flow of information that shapes their worldview, self-image, perception and self-esteem. This comes with heightened psychological and physical risks. That said, most platforms now have separate terms of use/service for young people. This, while it can be taken as a positive step, is far from

sufficient. For instance, requirements such as age verification and parental oversight, are criticized for assumption of parents' high digital literacy, access to official documents (such as official ID) and credit card (e.g., YouTube, iOS and Android). These protection mechanisms are disproportionately drawn on the empirical reality/experience of the Western world with less consideration to the Global South. The other challenge, a significant number of young people in the world are left out of the opportunity to benefit from the positive contribution of digital technologies due to socio-economic factors, instability and lack of access to material and nonmaterial digital resources.

### **How does violence/inequality differ between continents/cultures? What is different in Europe than in Africa?**

One key source of continent-level inequality follows historical legacies and patterns of past power relationships between nations, for example, the continued impact and implications of colonial legacies on post-colonial nations and norms of governance. Such legacies continue manifesting through unequal economic and political power and leverage to shape key global institutions and norms. This can also include the central role of businesses as facilitators and beneficiaries of power asymmetry in the past and present. That being said, the face and nature of violence vary depending on the specific local contexts. For some, it manifests in a form of poverty, cyclical conflict and a perpetual state of instability and unequal resource distribution and access to opportunities to develop one's capacity. While most of these are common in the global South, such as Africa, it is common to see different forms of marginalization and inequalities of opportunities in the Global North.

The key difference between Africa and Europe in the context of violence and inequality is – Both have internal inequalities where different groups are subjected to varying forms of domination and marginalization at the intersection of socio-economic background, ethnic identity, race, and gender identity. In Africa, these inequalities often manifest in a violent encounter between those in control of power at the national level and the people (or specific affected group). In Europe, strong institutional infrastructure such as an independent judiciary, allows people to file complaints through stable and reliable institutions. Another difference in the context of historical injustice, Europe has been at the sending end of historical injustices such as slavery, colonialism etc., while Africa has been at the receiving end of those injustices.

If I may tweak the cultural dimension of the question a bit – injustice/violence in cultural context is what scholars articulated as cultural imperialism. This is when one culture and way of being dominates others, presents itself as a universal, and sets itself as a norm against which all other cultures are evaluated/judged. Even though it draws on the experience of some, it projects itself as representative of all. This is a form of injustice that can be seen in both the global South and North.

### **How can the spiral of violence on the Internet be put to an end? Who is responsible?**

This requires rethinking the traditional perspectives on how responsibilities are attributed and why. The digital space is sustained by the activities of multiple actors, including users, so

one starting point could be to think of the responsibility of these actors in improving/transforming the digital space.

### **Why do you feel research on this topic is important?**

Almost every aspect of public and private life is mediated by data-driven technologies creating both opportunities and challenges. Hence, it is a matter of necessity to think of what it means to be ethical, responsible, and critical in this space. To study and understand how governance institutions are being shaped and social relations are configured in this space.

### **Any last advice for (young) people, facing violence online?**

First, to have a space and time to disconnect. Second, to be reflective and critical of how they engage with different digital platforms and understand their rights and potential risks attached to the technologies they use. This can partly be done at the school level through specialized training and awareness creation.

**Thank you so much for your valuable time.**



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