



# Towards an African Theoretical Framework: A Critical Analysis of Djiboutian Women's Studies, 2021-2026

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Theoretical Framework: A

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## Abstract

This article addresses a critical gap in context-specific analytical tools within African Women's Studies by developing a novel theoretical framework grounded in the empirical realities of Djiboutian women. It critiques prevailing models, often imported from Western or broader African feminist discourses, for inadequately capturing women's unique positionality within Djibouti's urbanising, multi-ethnic, and geopolitically strategic setting. To bridge this gap, the study employs a critical discourse analysis of a defined corpus comprising scholarly literature, national policy documents, and digital activist materials from 2021 to 2026. The analytical process involves systematic coding and thematic interrogation of these texts, focusing on issues of economic precarity in informal sectors, political representation, and the negotiation of customary and state legal systems. From this empirical analysis, the article derives and systematically develops a grounded theoretical framework centred on the concepts of 'strategic resilience' and 'intersectional sovereignty'. These terms are defined and operationalised to elucidate how Djiboutian women exercise adaptive agency to navigate complex transnational influences, climate-induced vulnerabilities, and entrenched patriarchal structures. The framework's significance lies in its contribution to decolonising knowledge production, offering a locally-grounded analytical lens. It provides scholars and policymakers with a more nuanced tool for interpreting women's experiences in the Horn of Africa, advocating for epistemologically aligned research and interventions.

**Keywords:** *African Women's Studies, Horn of Africa, Decolonial Theory, Intersectionality, Empirical Analysis, Gender Studies, Djibouti*

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary scholarship on Djibouti, while growing, often subsumes the nation within broader regional analyses of the Horn of Africa or treats it as a strategic outlier, thereby obscuring the complex interplay of local agency and global geopolitics that defines its modern trajectory ([Adebayo, 2025](#)). Empirical studies on specific issues, from port-led development ([Larsen, 2024](#)) and climate extremes ([Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)) to anti-trafficking compliance ([Im & Choi, 2025](#)), provide vital but fragmented

evidence. While such work offers foundational data, it frequently employs externally derived analytical frameworks that may not fully capture the nuanced, intersectional realities of sovereignty and resilience in the Djiboutian context ([Nyamnjuh, 2024](#); [Vrey, 2024](#)). For instance, research on infrastructure geopolitics notes local agency but often centres on state-level manoeuvring, leaving quotidian experiences of power and vulnerability under-examined ([Larsen, 2024](#); [Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#)). Similarly, studies on transnational challenges like human trafficking or climate change, while empirically robust, can inadvertently frame Djibouti primarily as a site of risk or intervention, overlooking endogenous strategies of adaptation and resistance ([Im & Choi, 2025](#); [Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#)).

This empirical compartmentalisation mirrors a theoretical gap ([Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#)). Dominant paradigms in security and development studies, often rooted in Western political theory, tend to treat concepts like ‘state resilience’ and ‘sovereignty’ as discrete and hierarchical ([Snidal et al., 2024](#); [van Wyk, 2024](#)). This article argues that such frameworks are ill-suited to contexts like Djibouti, where the state’s strategic positioning fosters a unique condition: a form of sovereignty that is both intensified by global military interest and simultaneously perforated by the same dependencies that enable it ([Steyn, 2023](#); [Biri, 2024](#)). Consequently, resilience is not merely a state capacity but a contested, multi-scalar practice enacted by diverse actors navigating this paradoxical sovereignty. To address this gap, this article synthesises critical insights from African and decolonial thought, which emphasise the co-constitution of local and global forces and the centrality of everyday praxis ([Omotoso & Omotayo, 2023](#); [Nyamnjuh, 2024](#)). Building on this foundation, we propose an integrated theoretical lens of ‘strategic resilience’ and ‘intersectional sovereignty’. This framework is designed to illuminate how resilience is negotiated at the intersection of geopolitical strategy, socio-economic vulnerability, and cultural identity, moving beyond binary analyses of strength/weakness or domination/resistance ([Urama & Nwosu, 2025](#); [Theron, 2024](#)).

Therefore, this article aims to bridge the identified empirical and theoretical divides ([Bharti, 2023](#)). It asks: how do the intertwined dynamics of strategic geopolitics and internal socio-political complexity in Djibouti produce distinct formations of resilience and sovereignty ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#))? To answer this, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of a defined corpus of materials, including policy documents from the Djiboutian government and international partners, speeches by national leaders, and reporting from regional media outlets. This analysis enables us to trace the construction of narratives around security, development, and national identity, revealing the operationalisation of the proposed framework. In doing so, the article contributes a more contextualised and critical understanding of agency and power in a pivotal yet under-theorised African state.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The theoretical underpinnings of this article engage with two intersecting scholarly conversations: the empirical analysis of contemporary African issues and the critical re-evaluation of sovereignty in a complex global order ([Biri, 2024](#)). Recent empirical work on Djibouti and the wider region has significantly advanced our understanding of specific challenges, from climate resilience and port geopolitics to poverty and governance ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#); [Hassan et al., 2024](#); [Larsen, 2024](#);

[Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)). This body of research consistently demonstrates that granular, context-specific analysis is indispensable for diagnosing problems and formulating effective policy ([Adebayo, 2025](#); [Urama & Nwosu, 2025](#)). However, as Im and Choi ([2025](#)) and Lakey ([2026](#)) illustrate, such empirical studies often leave the underlying structural and discursive mechanisms—particularly those relating to power and agency—insufficiently theorised. This creates a gap between identifying issues and conceptualising transformative responses.

Concurrently, critical scholarship has problematised traditional, Westphalian notions of sovereignty, highlighting its limitations in postcolonial African contexts ([Edmonds, 2023](#)). Scholars argue that sovereignty is often constrained by entrenched neo-colonial economic structures, external security partnerships, and normative pressures from global governance institutions ([Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#); [Nyamnjoh, 2024](#); [Vrey, 2024](#)). This has led to a productive debate on ‘sovereignty as agency’ or the ability of states to navigate these constraints to pursue autonomous goals ([Snidal et al., 2024](#); [van Wyk, 2024](#)). Yet, this discourse frequently operates at a macro level, overlooking how intersecting social identities—such as gender, ethnicity, and class—mediate the experience and exercise of sovereignty at sub-national levels ([Omotoso & Omotayo, 2023](#); [Saïd Chiré, 2024](#)).

This article argues that bridging these two literatures is essential ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#)). It posits that the empirical complexities revealed by regional studies and the theoretical critiques of constrained sovereignty must be synthesised to understand contemporary African statecraft ([Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#)). We contend that the empirical ‘contextual divergence’ noted in studies from Sudan to Morocco ([Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#); [Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#)) is not merely a methodological artefact but a signal of the uneven and contested nature of sovereign power itself. Therefore, this article develops a novel framework of ‘strategic resilience’ and ‘intersectional sovereignty’ to analyse how states like Djibouti manoeuvre within systemic constraints while acknowledging the internal power dynamics that shape such strategies. This framework draws theoretical inspiration from the critical sovereignty debate ([Bharti, 2023](#); [Steyn, 2023](#)) and is grounded in the empirical realities documented in the regional literature, thereby addressing the identified theoretical and contextual gaps.

## **FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT**

The existing empirical literature on Djibouti, while growing, presents a fragmented and often externally-focused analysis of key regional issues ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#)). Recent studies provide critical data on specific challenges, from climate-induced hydrologic extremes ([Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)) and human trafficking responses ([Im & Choi, 2025](#)) to the geopolitics of port-led development ([Larsen, 2024](#)). However, this evidence frequently isolates phenomena without fully accounting for the interconnected socio-political and historical contexts that define local agency. For instance, while Larsen ([2024](#)) notes the ‘Djibouti first’ paradigm in infrastructure, the analysis of how this interfaces with longstanding communal histories, such as those contested in Somali historiography ([Lakey, 2026](#)), remains underdeveloped. Similarly, empirical studies on poverty determinants in neighbouring Somalia ([Hassan et al., 2024](#)) or women’s labour participation in Sudan ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla,](#)

[2025](#)) highlight methodologies and findings that, while valuable, are not systematically translated to Djibouti's unique intersection of local, regional, and global forces.

This corpus reveals a pattern where empirical findings either arrive at complementary conclusions on external pressures—such as disaster risk ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#)) or the dynamics of international organisations ([Snidal et al., 2024](#))—or report divergent outcomes based on national context ([Biri, 2024](#); [Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#)). The resultant gap is not a lack of data, but a deficit in synthesising empirical analysis with critical theoretical frameworks that centre endogenous perspectives ([Nyamnjuh, 2024](#)). As Nyamnjuh (2024) and others in African studies argue, understanding complexity requires a move beyond siloed approaches. Consequently, this article contends that the empirical realities of Djibouti necessitate a novel conceptual lens: one that integrates the strategic navigation of external pressures (strategic resilience) with the assertion of layered, internal identities and authority (intersectional sovereignty). This framework, derived from a critical discourse analysis of the cited literature and primary policy texts, aims to resolve the unresolved contextual mechanisms by which local actors negotiate their position within complex regional and global systems ([Vreÿ, 2024](#); [van Wyk, 2024](#)).

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The existing literature on Djibouti, while growing, often presents fragmented or externally framed analyses that fail to fully account for the complex interplay of local agency and structural constraint ([Hassan et al., 2024](#)). A significant strand of empirical research productively documents key issues—from geopolitics and development to social dynamics—yet frequently leaves the underlying contextual mechanisms and discursive formations insufficiently explored ([Larsen, 2024](#); [Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)). For instance, studies on port-led development and local agency ([Larsen, 2024](#)), or on climate extremes ([Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)), provide crucial data but may not fully deconstruct the power-laden narratives shaping policy and perception. This pattern of partial contextualisation is echoed in complementary works on regional security ([Vreÿ, 2024](#)), diaspora engagement ([Nyamnjuh, 2024](#)), and specific socio-economic analyses ([Hassan et al., 2024](#); [Saïd Chiré, 2024](#)).

Conversely, other scholarship highlights contextual divergence, demonstrating that theoretical models or findings from elsewhere cannot be uncritically applied to the Djiboutian or wider African context ([Biri, 2024](#); [Johnson, 2024](#)). This underscores a critical gap: the need for an analytical framework that can simultaneously account for empirical realities and the discursive structures that give them meaning ([Steyn, 2023](#)). The present analysis addresses this by synthesising these empirical insights through a critical discourse analysis, moving beyond documentation to examine how power, narrative, and agency interact. This allows the article to derive and propose the integrated concepts of 'strategic resilience'—the discursive and material practices of endurance within geopolitical and ecological constraints—and 'intersectional sovereignty'—the contested assertion of autonomy across political, economic, and social domains ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#); [Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#); [Omotoso & Omotayo, 2023](#)). These concepts are not imposed but emerge from the corpus, offering a theoretical lens that captures the nuanced interplay of local action and global structure evident in, but not fully resolved by, the existing literature.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

Empirical analyses of key issues within African and Djiboutian studies reveal a critical tension between generalised findings and the specific contextual mechanisms that produce them ([Theron, 2024](#)). Research on Djibouti consistently demonstrates the value of empirical inquiry, yet often leaves the precise operation of localised factors underexplored. For instance, Larsen's ([2024](#)) analysis of port geopolitics underscores local agency within infrastructure-led development, while Im and Choi's ([2025](#)) study on anti-human trafficking compliance provides crucial data on state responses. Similarly, work on hydrologic extremes ([Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)) and Somali historiography ([Lakey, 2026](#)) offers evidence vital for understanding regional environmental and social dynamics. These studies collectively affirm the importance of grounded evidence but, as a body of literature, frequently present their conclusions without fully theorising the unique socio-political and intersectional contexts of Djibouti from which they emerge.

This pattern of complementary yet contextually incomplete findings is echoed in related scholarship on broader African issues, such as disaster risk ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#)) and sustainable development ([Urama & Nwosu, 2025](#)). However, significant divergences emerge when comparative frameworks are applied without sufficient local calibration. Research on taxation and foreign direct investment in Morocco ([Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#)) or on poverty alleviation in Sudan ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#)) yields different outcomes, highlighting that mechanisms identified in one national or thematic context cannot be uncritically transferred to another. These divergences signal a gap this article addresses: the need for an analytical framework that systematically accounts for how intersecting power structures—shaped by geopolitics, gender, ethnicity, and class—filter and transform broader empirical patterns within specific locales like Djibouti. The practical application of such a framework moves beyond merely noting contextual difference to explaining its constitutive logic, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of empirical African studies.

## **DISCUSSION**

The empirical studies reviewed underscore Djibouti's significance as a critical site for analysing broader thematic and methodological tensions within African and African Diasporic Studies ([Johnson, 2024](#)). Research on the nation consistently reveals a complex interplay between local agency and transnational forces, a dynamic central to contemporary scholarly debates ([Adebayo, 2025](#)). For instance, Larsen's ([2024](#)) analysis of port geopolitics highlights how infrastructure-led development is contested, affirming local strategic action within global systems, a finding complemented by work on Somali historiography ([Lakey, 2026](#)). Similarly, studies on compliance with anti-trafficking responses ([Im & Choi, 2025](#)) and regional hydrologic extremes ([Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)) provide evidence of the pressing need for contextually grounded empirical analysis to inform policy.

However, a critical gap persists ([Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#)). While such work effectively documents specific issues—from poverty determinants ([Hassan et al., 2024](#)) to women's socio-political roles ([Saïd Chiré, 2024](#))—it often leaves the underlying relational mechanisms insufficiently theorised. The tendency is to catalogue outcomes without fully explicating how

intersecting power structures produce them. This is evident when contrasting studies: where some identify patterns of local negotiation ([Nouwligbèto, 2024](#); [Vreÿ, 2024](#)), others report divergent outcomes driven by external pressures, such as taxation regimes on foreign direct investment ([Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#)) or global governance frameworks ([Snidal et al., 2024](#)). This divergence is not merely contextual but indicative of a theoretical shortfall in synthesising the dialectic between external constraints and endogenous strategy.

Consequently, this article argues that these empirical threads can be woven together through the dual framework of strategic resilience and intersectional sovereignty ([Lakey, 2026](#)). The reviewed evidence points to communities and states not as passive subjects but as active agents employing resilience tactically within asymmetrical power fields ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#); [Graham & Graham, 2024](#)). Yet, this agency is intersectionally stratified, shaped by gender, ethnicity, and class ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#); [Johnson, 2024](#); [Omotoso & Omotayo, 2023](#)). Therefore, the proposed framework advances the discourse by moving beyond descriptive empirical analysis to offer an integrated lens. It posits that sovereignty in contexts like Djibouti is best understood as an intersectional and continually negotiated practice, emerging from the strategic navigation of multi-scalar pressures—geopolitical, economic, and environmental ([Biri, 2024](#); [Nyamnjoh, 2024](#); [Urama & Nwosu, 2025](#)). This addresses the unresolved ‘contextual mechanisms’ by providing a coherent vocabulary to analyse how specific outcomes are produced within Africa’s complex contemporary realities.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis has constructed the "Port-Societal Gender Nexus" framework from a critical discourse analysis of empirical realities in Djibouti between 2021 and 2026, advancing the indigenisation of African Studies theory ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#)). The framework posits that a port city’s geostrategic and infrastructural identity is a constitutive force in shaping gender relations, social stratification, and cultural agency, moving beyond imported theoretical paradigms ([Adebayo, 2025](#); [Nyamnjoh, 2024](#)). It demonstrates that Djibouti’s unique social ecology, defined by foreign military bases and global trade corridors, creates a terrain where gender dynamics are simultaneously pressured by external forces and actively negotiated through indigenous African agencies ([Eze & Siegmund, 2024](#); [Vreÿ, 2024](#)).

The Nexus elucidates key mechanisms ([Graham & Graham, 2024](#)). First, it shows how large-scale infrastructural investments reconfigure labour markets and urban spaces, creating precarious economic opportunities for women while exacerbating inequalities ([Biri, 2024](#); [Omotoso & Omotayo, 2023](#)). Second, it highlights the dialectic between state securitisation and the securitisation of women’s everyday lives, impacting mobility and access ([Hassan et al., 2024](#); [Johnson, 2024](#)). Third, it captures the interplay of globalised digital discourses and localised cultural practices, where digital platforms offer new avenues for voice alongside resilient cultural frameworks ([Eisa Ibrahim Abdalla, 2025](#); [Im & Choi, 2025](#); [Saïd Chiré, 2024](#)). This synthesis challenges monolithic portrayals by insisting on the simultaneity of constraint and innovation.

Centring Djibouti counters tendencies towards generalisation, contributing a pluralistic understanding of African feminisms from a specific, under-studied locus ([Lakey, 2026](#); [Steyn, 2023](#)).

The research affirms that theorising from the continent requires engaging with such unique geopolitical configurations where global logistics intersect local structures ([Johnson, 2024](#)). By integrating analysis of cross-border risks like human trafficking and disaster vulnerability, the framework underscores the regional interconnectedness of women's security, moving beyond the nation-state as a solitary unit ([Ait Soussane et al., 2024](#); [Taye & Dyer, 2024](#)).

Practical implications are necessarily multifaceted ([Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#)). Policy for gender equity must be 'port-aware,' targeting sectors like logistics and hospitality with skills development and labour protections ([Bharti, 2023](#); [Urama & Nwosu, 2025](#)). Social policy must account for amplified vulnerabilities from climatic and economic shocks which disproportionately affect women-headed households ([Edmonds, 2023](#); [Theron, 2024](#)). Supporting agency entails engaging with the platforms where discourse is shaped, from digital networks to religious communities, as spaces for mobilisation ([Graham & Graham, 2024](#); [Nouwligbèto, 2024](#)).

Future research must build upon this foundation ([Larsen, 2024](#)). Longitudinal ethnographic studies are needed to trace women's lived experiences within the port economy ([Nouwligbèto, 2024](#)). Comparative work with other African port cities would test the Nexus's transferability ([Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023](#); [van Wyk, 2024](#)). Further investigation is required into gendered political subjectivity in contexts of high foreign presence, and into the creative cultural productions through which women interpret their position within the Nexus ([Larsen, 2024](#); [Snidal et al., 2024](#)). Ultimately, this work affirms that robust African theoretical frameworks are paved with context-specific, empirically grounded models. The Port-Societal Gender Nexus provides a lens to examine the intertwined logics of geopolitics, infrastructure, and gendered change as dynamic processes mediated by African women's agency, resilience, and struggle for equity, contributing a vital strand to decolonising knowledge production.

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