

## Priscilla Akomprah receives Hélène Phoa Gender Studies Research Thesis Prize 2025

The Hélène Phoa Gender Studies Research Thesis Prize has been awarded to Priscilla Akomprah during the diploma Graduation Ceremony of the Research Master Gender Studies on 13 November to her thesis titled *Marriage, Faith, and Harm: A Feminist Analysis of Domestic Violence in Ghana*. This thesis “explores how bride price (marriage) and Christian religious teachings intersect with domestic violence in Ghana, using a Ghanaian decolonial feminist standpoint. It centres the voices of survivors as co-creators and it treats their lived experiences as critical knowledge. Drawing on eight in-depth interviews with individuals who span across domestic violence survivors, domestic violence support workers, law enforcers and church leaders, the study examines how marriage is conceptualized, how religious teachings shape understandings of domestic violence in unions, and how survivors navigate harm when these systems overlap.”

According to the Jury the abstract above shows “how clear she writes, how she avoids unnecessary jargon and thus reaches out to audiences that may include survivors, support workers and police and church leaders. The thesis stands out for its radical positioning of experiences of survivors and advocates in the development of not only ‘grounded theory’ but equally for ‘grounded interventions’ via a ‘Ghanaian feminist decolonial standpoint epistemology’. The way Akomprah assesses the intersection of different discourses helps in- and outsider to understand the risks associated with religious and cultural discourses on marriage. We read the thesis as fundamental effort to decolonize Western feminist theory. We applaud the way this thesis does not simply apply Western feminist interpretations to Ghanaian experiences, the strong focus on African feminist theory (so many authors that were new to most members of the jury, (Mama, Tamale, Asamoah-Gyadu, Oyěwùmí, Diala, A. C., Mohlabane, N., & Tshoaedi, M. ) but now receive attention they deserve), the clear explanation how orthodox Christian teachings shape expectations about marriage are illuminating. The conclusions differentiate clearly between recommendations for activists and advocates, and academic knowledge production.”

“An inspiring example of how academic researchers can engage with co-creators and informants: not only writing about, for and with, but also to them, honouring through a conversation the commitment to making knowledge as a communal project”

### Hélène Phoa Thesis Prize

The Hélène Phoa Thesis Prize was established by the family of Hélène Phoa, who passed away far too young in 2019. She was a graduate of the Research Master Gender Studies at Utrecht University. For Hélène’s family the Hélène Phoa Thesis Prize came

into being as a way as a way to turn their grief and sadness into something positive. With the help of generous family members and friends, and supported by the Gender Studies team, the Phoa family set up a dedicated fund at the Utrecht University Fund. This way, Hélène Phoa's love for Gender Studies and her fight for diversity and inclusion will be continued and commemorated.

The prize is intended to support a graduate as they move from being a student in gender studies to the next phase of their life, where 'doing gender' may find a new form. The prize includes a thousand euros, the awarding of which is made possible in part by the Friends of Humanities Utrecht University

In the past years the prize was received by Anita Prsa (2020), Sarah Trottier (2021), Rabeea Ahmad (2022), Jülide Sezer (2023) and Aikokul Ibraeva (2024). Each year, one of the members of Hélène's family takes part in the jury, as well as the former winner of the prize and an alumnae of the programme representing the labour market of Research Master Gender Studies students. The jury has been chaired by Prof. dr. Berteke Waaldijk in the first and past two years and by Prof. dr. Rosemarie Buikema in 2022 and Prof. dr. Kathrin Thiele in 2023.

## Interview with Priscilla Akomprah

### How does it feel to receive the Hélène Phoa Gender Studies Research Thesis Prize?

“The feeling is both surreal and deeply amazing. I am profoundly thankful to God for the opportunity to begin this master's journey. I am also deeply grateful to the family of Hélène Phoa for their decision to continue her legacy in such a beautiful and meaningful way. To say that I am beside myself with joy would be an understatement. Most importantly, I feel truly privileged to have written about these brave and inspiring women, and even more so that the work which sought to hold space for their lived experiences has received such a prestigious award. Lastly, I feel incredibly fortunate to be part of the Gender Studies Department, a community that continually pushes boundaries and strives for the betterment of all.”

### What was the topic of your thesis?

“The topic of My thesis is Marriage, Faith, and Harm: A Feminist Analysis of Domestic Violence in Ghan”. It explores how bride price and Christian religious teachings intersect with experiences of domestic violence. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, my work centers survivors' lived experiences as critical knowledge to examine how gendered power, religion, and culture shape both the endurance and contestation of violence.

I conducted interviews with survivors, support workers, law enforcers, and church leaders, to investigate how Christian teachings on forgiveness, endurance, and submission coexist with traditional expectations around marriage, and how these frameworks influence women's interpretations of harm. For example, whether as moral failure, divine trial, or social duty.

Again, I examined how women navigate these tensions, finding ways to reinterpret faith, reclaim agency, and create spaces of resistance within arguably constricting religious structures. By adopting a co-creation approach and engaging reflexively with my positionality, I sought to engage in knowledge production that does not speak for survivors, but with them.

Ultimately, my work argues that domestic violence in Ghana cannot be understood apart from the moral and spiritual economies that give it meaning. It therefore calls for feminist and decolonial approaches that take seriously African women's ways of knowing as essential for transforming the conditions that normalize the harm meted out to them."

## What was the research and writing process like?

"The research and writing process was a very personal, challenging, and deeply eye-opening experience for me, especially because of my close proximity to the topic and how much it resonated with my own context. Nevertheless, it was an extremely rewarding journey. Although I already had some understanding of the realities in the lives of my co-creators, I had never before had the privilege of sitting so closely with their stories, listening to their experiences, and understanding the meanings they made of them.

As this was the first research project of this magnitude that I had undertaken, engaging with such sensitive and profound material required immense emotional and intellectual grounding. I am deeply grateful for the unwavering support of my community: my mother, one of the strongest survivors I know; my co-creators whose voices form the very foundation of this work; my siblings, my partner, mentors, friends, supervisors, and all those remarkable individuals on whose shoulders I stood to complete this thesis.

I hope that this work will help re-open the conversation around domestic violence in Ghana, a topic that often seems to fade into the background. By sharing these stories and their meanings, I hope it has contributed to greater awareness, understanding, and action on an issue that affects so many lives."

## What does the future hold for you?

"This year has been intense for me, so I am taking things a bit more slowly and deliberately. I am currently working towards landing a role where I can continue

engaging with research and projects like the one of my thesis. I am also exploring the possibility of pursuing a PhD.

Above all, one thing remains certain. That, regardless of what the future holds or which path I take, I will continue to unapologetically hold space for the marginalized and for those who have experienced violence. I hope to use my work to amplify voices that are often overlooked and contribute to meaningful change.”