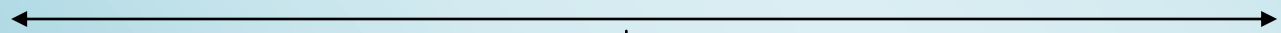


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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE BULAWAYO METROPOLITAN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

Social media satisfy a number of functions in any given society. In Zimbabwean societies, media inform, educate and entertain people. Informing and educating people amounts to empowering them in their different spheres of life. This study sought to interrogate the extent to which media empower women in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. The study adopted a qualitative methodology and used a case study design. Twenty purposively sampled women from different walks of life were interviewed to establish the extent to which they feel empowered through social media, limitations of depending on social media as a tool for empowerment as well as strategies on how social media can be more effective in its empowerment role. Interview proceedings were recorded verbatim, transcribed and taken back to participants for verification, prior to analysis using thematic content analysis approach.

Key words: Empowerment, Social media and Women.

INTRODUCTION

The social media's winds of change blowing across the world have not spared Zimbabwe as evidenced by the fact that many people of all ages in Zimbabwe – ranging from primary school children to pensioners are hooked to some form of social media. As argued by the United Nations (2010:online): “During the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults.” Globally, this trend is continuing unabated. In 2011, Dubai School of Governance (2011) documented the following statistics regarding the use of social media – Facebook was widely used, with over 800 million users worldwide. Of these, 350 million accessed Facebook through mobile devices. Twitter reached over 100 million users in 2011. Globally the gender distribution of users is almost 50 – 50. In the developing world, statistics for internet usage are as follows: Africa 25 percent, Asia 22 percent, Latin America 38 percent and Middle East 6 percent (Viallet, 2016). However, in Zimbabwe internet usage may be much lower than Africa's average usage due to power differentials in the distribution of resources between men and women, urban population and rural

population. In addition, poor network coverage in rural and remote areas may mean that people living in those areas are not exposed to network coverage which supports the use of social media. Notwithstanding these conjectures, we proceed with the assumption that given the global scenario, media has the potential to empower women in Zimbabwe in general and in Bulawayo in particular. In order to explore this assumption, we were guided by the following research questions:

- What do women understand by the concept social media?
- How has social media contributed to the empowerment of women?
- What are the social media's limitations in empowering women?
- Which strategies can be adopted to facilitate the empowering of women through social media?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

THE CONCEPT SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is defined by Business Dictionary online (undated) as primarily internet or cellular phone based applications and tools that are used to share information among people. They include popular networking websites like Facebook and Twitter; as well as bookmarking sites like Digg or Reddit. They involve blogging and forums and any aspect of an interactive presence which allows individuals ability to engage in conversations with one another, often as a discussion over a particular blog post, news article, or event.

THE FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIETY

The ability of the social media to transform lives is aptly captured in the observation by the United Nations (2010: online) that: "Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women". Loiseau and Nowacka (2015: online) state that:

Social media has proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, galvanizing action on the streets of cities around the world and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality. The explosion of social media and unprecedented use by women of new technologies represents important opportunities to bring gender equality and women's rights issues to the forefront of both policy making and media attention.

Dubai School of Government (2011:online) in a survey on media and empowerment of Arab women found out that a high percentage of respondents felt that social media could be an empowering tool for women, enhancing

their participation in several facets of their lives, including the legal (by promoting women's rights), economic (enhancing entrepreneurial and employment opportunities), political (increased political participation), and social (through self-expression and promoting social change) aspects. Literature reviewed by Loiseau and Nowacka (2015), highlights the following achievements of social media revolution and women's empowerment:

- Social media have transformed the landscape on how information is shared globally and the relationship between citizens and governments.
- Beyond their use as a social networking tool, social media allow for the first time any individual to share content and opinions to a global audience, bypassing traditional media or other modes of information transformation.
- Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have allowed activists around the world to retransmit events live to a broad online audience thereby making local issues, global concerns.

Daher (2012) highlights two other areas in which social media can bring positive spinoffs to women. First, social media could enhance women's participation in economic and political life, and allow them to increase their self expression and promote social change. Second, social media tools expose aspects of many people's daily lives (including women), affecting the way they interact with governments, do business, and engage in civil society movements. As aptly argued by Sibanda and Mafa (2015), media has the power to empower communities.

LIMITATIONS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE EMPOWERING OF SOCIETIES

Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) identify the following as limiting the media's empowerment function:

- ***Women's limited access to new technologies:*** Fully taking advantage of social media for empowerment for many women is restricted by illiteracy, language barriers and the digital divide in infrastructure between rural and urban areas. These factors affect in particular rural and indigenous women's online advocacy and opportunities to connect with other activists. As noted by a participant at the Social Good Summit, "The implications of this digital divide is also a service divide and an information divide. . . And information is power as we know" (Mashable Newsletter, 2016).
- ***Limited networking with institutional actors:*** Lower networking opportunities with cross-institutional partners, including decision makers and public figures, and disconnection from local women's movements can negatively affect the success of women's empowerment through media.

- **Information overload and scaling up:** A plethora of small online campaigns on specific issues can overwhelm and lead to activism FATIGUE. This affects the ability to scale up the campaign to a global level and attract new audiences who can in turn influence women's empowerment.
- **Censorship and harassment:** Female-written blogs and websites have also been subject to censorship by governments. Sexual harassment of female activists has been reported in the online discussion and websites providing information on subjects related to sexual health and reproductive rights have been taken offline. Negative gender stereotypes and lower representation of women in both traditional and new media organizations also silence women, thereby negatively affecting women's empowerment.

Tomli (2012) in Daher (2012) identifies two other limitations: First, ICT Literacy, which is the ability to use digital technology, communication tools, and/or networks to define access, manage, integrate, evaluate, create, and communicate information ethically and legally in order to function in a knowledge society. Second, social constraints, which include family and society barriers and stereotypes placed on women especially in areas where women work. In some cases, limitations are due to media literacy. Hobb (1998) in Sibanda and Mafa (2015) define media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms. The challenge is when women lack the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA.

Media's potential to empower women implicitly means that no stones should be left unturned in ensuring that this potential is fully exploited. UNESCO (2014) in Viallet (2016:online) argues that: "New technologies can be powerful multipliers for human rights and empowerment, but this doesn't happen by itself . . . real empowerment comes from skills and opportunities to use them". Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) proffer the following three strategies that could be used to facilitate the empowerment of women through media:

- *Women should be trained to make greater use of information technology for communication and the media.* Ensuring equal access to and use of new technologies is critical for maximizing social media's empowerment role. UNESCO (2014) in Valliet (2016) emphasises that: "ICTs must be inclusive, bridging divides, not deepening them . . . underpinned by respect for human rights and dignity".

- *The capacity of women to participate in decision making and leadership should be increased.* Increasing female leadership in media organizations as well as in decision-making processes can help the success of online advocacy campaigns focusing on women's rights and development. Strategic partners can ensure that the policy loop is complete and that advocacy can influence both decision-making processes and public awareness on key women's rights and empowerment issues.
- *Involve a cross-sector of actors, including grassroots women's networks, traditional media and men.* Involving men and other non-traditional partners can reinforce messaging and help campaigns attract greater attention both locally and internationally.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The study was conducted in Bulawayo's Cowdry Park Suburb. The focus was to interrogate the views of women on their empowerment through Media. In our views, the chosen suburb is one of the fastest growing residential areas in Bulawayo, with women playing a significant role in this development. We adopted a qualitative methodology where we used a case study design to generate data from twenty purposively sampled women from different walks of life. We settled for the qualitative methodology because it is an appropriate methodology when researchers are interested in answers to How, What and Why questions. Getting answers to such questions was central to our study. Purposively sampling enabled us to select data-rich in line with the research questions which guided our investigation. Data were generated through face-to-face interviews. This approach gave us the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. After getting permission from the participants, we recorded interview proceedings verbatim. After the interviews, we transcribed the data and took them to the participants for member checking. We analysed the data through thematic content analysis which entailed the following activities: segmenting, coding, enumeration and arrangement of data into themes and sub-themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Biodata of the Study Sample

The study sample consisted of twenty women from different walks of life, ranging from house wives to professionals. This diversity proved useful for the study, since it yielded data from a divergent sample.

What women understand by the concept social media

Most participants did not define social media. Instead they mentioned the gadgets that are normally associated with social media as well as social media platforms. Frequently mentioned were television sets, iphones, tablets, facebook, YouTube, Linkdin, Tweeter, and whatsapp. Participants' knowledge of these gadgets and social media platforms augured well for this study. The examples of social media applications and tools that were mentioned by participants are similar to those that are cited in literature. Participants' knowledge of applications and tools that constitute social media was an assurance that participants knew the phenomenon under investigation, and that this knowledge was bound to make them effective interviews. True to this assumption, the participants did not disappoint during interviews.

How social media contributes to the empowerment of women

Participants mentioned and demonstrated a number of ways in which social media empowered them - ranging from family issues to education and professional issues. Focusing on the family some of the participants highlighted the following:

I can get some ideas on how to decorate, bake, cook and many other activities.

It is easy to share information with family members. Through whatsapp groups, we can share family issues and solve problems online. Distance ceases to be a barrier to communication.

An added advantage is that we can chat for a long time because it is cheaper to chat, than to call. In fact, one can reach a huge number of people with little effort.

Contribution of social media to Community development

Participants felt that social media play a vital role in community development. For example, one participant reiterated that: "We have chat groups with church members and other community members to update each other". Similarly, another one quipped that: Whatsapp groups make it possible for community members to share information and update each other, thereby improving social relationships with community members. In our community, using various social media platforms, we are able to discuss factors affecting women and children as well as exploring strategies that we can use to address our challenges". Yet another participant highlighted that: "Social media make it possible for women to share thoughts, feelings and events, e.g. through blogging. They make it possible to hold conversations by posting messages".

Contribution of Social Media to Women's Professional Development

Participants unanimously agreed that social media immensely contribute to women's professional development. Sentiments which resonated throughout the interviews on this aspect include the following:

Members can establish and document networks of people known to them and trust professionally. Thus social media such as LinkedIn links professionals as the name denotes.

Accessibility of the internet at home has helped me in my studies. Instead of going to the library to research, I can now do it at home.

Through social media, I am able to send information to study partners and groups at minimum cost.

I google for information when I am researching on assignments and I can chat with others who are doing the same course with me.

Participants' responses on the positive impact of social media echoed views from a number of literature sources such as United Nations (2010) and Sibanda and Mafa (2015). The fact that women understand and appreciate the contribution of social media to their social and professional lives may mean that women will continue using social media and convince their peers, relatives and other community members. Assuming that women use social media responsibly, more benefits are likely to accrue to women.

Social media's limitations in empowering women

While participants mentioned ways in which social media have contributed to their family, community and professional development, they were also aware of social media's limitations as an empowerment tool. One participant pointed out that social media are full of jokes so one needs an analytic mind to separate worthwhile advice from the plethora of jokes. Another participant was very explicit on challenges posed by social media. She noted that: "Social media lack personal touch and do not encourage creativity amongst people as they have created a dependency syndrome". The participant was particular about security as she reiterated that: "Users' data privacy is a challenge because social media create easy access for hackers to launch spam attacks and commit fraud, e.g. identify theft, and the users' photos can be misused or altered". A further contribution on women's security from yet another participant was that: "Some people can also use social media to rob unsuspecting women by promising them jobs or money to empower themselves". The issue of social media accessibility and availability also dominated the interviews. This contribution from one of the participants captures the general

sentiments that were aired on availability and accessibility: “Social media gadgets are not readily available to every woman in the community, cost implications and at times invasion of privacy”. Social media literacy also featured prominently during discussions – where participants felt that some of the women may not derive maximum benefit from social media due to ignorance and in ability to use some of the social media gadgets’ functions. For example, their use of social media gadgets may be limited to phoning, receiving calls and sending and receiving short mail messages. However, none of the participants mentioned poor network coverage as a limitation. This could be attributed to the fact that being urban dwellers, where network is very reliable – this limitation experienced in greater parts of rural Africa, is not a limitation.

Most of the limitations that came up during interviews are well documented in literature, for example Daher (2012) and Loiseau and Nowacka (2015). Left unaddressed, these limitations have the potential to erode the social media’s empowering benefits that have accrued to women who have access to social media.

Strategies that can be adopted to facilitate the empowering of women through social media

Participants suggested a number of strategies that can be used to ensure that social media play an effective role in empowering women. Some of the strategies that were frequently mentioned are:

- Social media gadgets should be made economically available.
- There is need to encourage women especially uneducated/housewives to equip themselves with computer skills so that they are not isolated from the global village/virtual world. Gender activists can assist women in this regard.
- Women should be provided with links and educational advice on business ventures they can do.
- Women can leverage social media to grow their clientele base, to build relations with peers as they can self-publish and reach a wide audience hence making a bigger impact in the world.
- Suggestions put forth by participants indicate that it is not all gloom. These suggestions dovetail into ideas from by Unesco (2014); Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) and Sibanda and Mafa (2015). Since use of social media appears to be on the rise, indications are that in the absence of sustainable strategies to address the limitations, a digital divide could separate communities. Therefore, there is urgent need to seriously consider some of these strategies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many urban women in Cowdray Park, a suburb in Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) are active on the social media. Social media have positively impacted the family, community and professional lives of women who use them. However, there are economic, security, accessibility and literacy challenges that limit the effectiveness of social media's empowering role. In order for social media to play an effective empowering role, we recommend that:

- Social media gadgets be made more accessible to women;
- Women, especially the illiterate, be trained in how to use the different functions that are available on social media gadgets; and
- In order to address the safety concerns that were raised by participants, women users of social media gadgets should be sensitized of the safety features available;

We also recommend that the study be replicated on a larger scale, using a heterogeneous sample of participants (participants drawn from urban, resettlement, rural areas, growth points and mining towns). Our assumption is that findings from such a sample will illuminate the real value of the contribution of social media to the empowerment of women in Zimbabwe.

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