

EXAMINING THE AUDIENCE CAPTURING METHODOLOGIES ADOPTED BY WOMEN-NGOS IN DISSEMINATING GENDER-SENSITISATION MESSAGES IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The advancement in information technology has brought in a paradigm shift in the manner in which gender mainstreaming is presently conducted in comparison to the first, second, and third waves of feminism. Through a qualitative research approach, the article explores strategies being employed by women-NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as they disseminate women empowerment education. The findings show that while women-NGOs in Zimbabwe have not totally abandoned traditional advocacy approaches, they are increasingly tilting towards digital activism as they take advantage of the popularity of social media and other audience-captivating methodologies. The study findings show that the art of filmmaking and songs are increasingly being employed as tools to relay gender sensitive education. On the other hand, roadshows are increasingly becoming a popular grassroots modality used in the fight against gender insensitive practices and discriminatory attitudes. These strategies are preferred because they ensure inclusivity and improve coverage; thereby enhancing the overall impact of women-NGOs' efforts. Using social work lenses, the study recommends the inclusion of gender equality teachings in the primary education curricula as a way of promoting gender sensitisation and tolerance from an early age. Women-NGOs are also encouraged to value

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evidence-based intervention models which are informed by the monitoring and evaluation of their gender-mainstreaming strategies.

Key words: *gender mainstreaming; social work; social media*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Gender disparities have existed since time immemorial. However, significant strides have been made in addressing gender imbalances globally. Most such efforts have been anchored by the work of the United Nations as encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goal Number Three (MDG 3) (Mashiri, 2013; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2013) and the Sustainable Development Goal Number Five (SDG 5) (Mafa and Simango, 2021). Women have for long been subjected to unfair treatment in matters such as the gender pay gap for the same job (Bishu and Alkadry, 2016); representation in leadership positions and the denial of their democratic rights to vote (Springer, 2002). amongst other issues. Also, many women have suffered and continue to suffer from the burden of domestication and reproductive duties. In many ways, this compromises their economic advancement (Swank and Fahs, 2017; Mafa *et al.*, 2024).

It is for this reason that feminism emerged to address these gender inequalities and ensure that institutional, cultural and structural barriers that keep women in a disadvantaged position are dismantled (Swank and Fahs, 2017; Madsen, 2000). In times past, efforts to tackle gender imbalances were mainly informal and characterised by traditional forms of advocacy such as picketing and demonstrations (Lots, 2003). In Zimbabwe, Van eerduwijk and Mugadza (2015) highlight that such movements advocating for the rights of women started informally from church groups and self-help groups. They further note that these movements heavily relied on traditional methodologies and the use of pamphlets with gender-inclined messages. This was also common among civil societies and women-

NGOs. Central to advocacy modalities was to petition and advocate for societal recognition of women as equal to men in the eyes of the law, a thought reinforced by liberal feminists (Lots, 2003).

Zimbabwe has come a long way in fighting against the oppression of women. However, a lot remains to be done. One of the key developments in the fight against gender inequality and has been through the legislative processes (Mafa *et al.*, 2021; Maposa, 2024). To this end, the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) has a number of progressive provisions targeted at ensuring women representation in leadership as well as promoting gender equality in all aspects of life. Even though gender equality is documented and implied in Zimbabwe's Constitution, the implementation of the policies on the ground attests to the contrary (Nhapi, 2022; Maposa, 2024). In 2013, the Government of Zimbabwe came up with the National Gender Policy (2013-2017) (NGP), which was a replacement for the 2004 National Gender Policy. Despite the deliberate efforts and progressive intentions of the National Gender Policy (2013-2017), it has also failed to realise gender parity in Zimbabwe; even though some positive changes have been noticed (Human Development Report, 2020). Against this backdrop, many advocacy agencies, such as women-NGOs, are increasingly resorting to gender mainstreaming measures in their work and ensuring that gender sensitive messaging is used to promote gender parity and fight against gender discrimination and social exclusion. This move was prompted by the recognition of the importance of gender sensitisation and gender mainstreaming if gender parity is to be realised.

From a social work perspective, information is very important in the conscientisation of society when working to promote social justice and empowerment for the marginalised groups (Dibbets and Eijkman, 2018, Mafa *et al.*, 2024). Twikirize et al. (2013) argue that the relevance of social work in accelerating gender equality and women

empowerment is embedded in the very definition of the social work profession. Social work is not only a problem-solving profession, but also an agent of change that aims to empower individuals and groups to promote social development. The structure of the social work profession, its methods of intervention, value-base, and principles, are critical when working with disadvantaged groups. Its connection with women's rights and welfare is evident in the profession's emphasis on human rights (Dibbets and Eijkman, 2018). This, therefore, positions social workers as key stakeholders who can play a critical role in efforts targeted at promoting gender parity, especially in women-NGOs through information dissemination and sensitising people on laws.

In relation to this, NEST (2016) and Mafa and Simango (2021) argue that current laws that are supposed to address gender imbalances globally are largely reactive and not proactive. As such, they do not guarantee the eradication of women's subjugation which mostly emanates from structural barriers militating against the attainment of gender parity. This is because remedial actions are activated only after a problem has occurred and fail to tackle the root causes of gender imbalances. In as much as women need to be empowered and educated on their rights and their responsibilities (Kabeer, 2005; Mutanana and Bukaliya, 2015; Van eedewijk and Mugadza, 2015), cultural feminism argues that men also need to be educated on the consequences of some of the patriarchal values and practices that violate the rights of women (Ghodsee, 2004; Beckett, 2005; Baehr, 2013). This is with an understanding that women empowerment is a multi-sectoral strategy that requires the inclusion of all stakeholders in order to eradicate societal gender biases. When cultural, institutional and structural barriers to gender parity are dismantled through gender-sensitisation, only then can gender equality be a reality.

As part of their gender-sensitisation and conscientisation efforts, many organisations, including women-NGOs, have largely embraced and taken advantage of technological advances as they seek to maximise on their reach and impact (Zinyama, 2019; Mugari and Cheng, 2020). In Zimbabwe, ICT has long been embraced at macro level through the e-Readiness Survey of 2004 and the National ICT Framework of 2007. This has seen many changes in tele density and mobile access. The widespread use of technology and smart devices in particular, means that coverage is high within the country, making it easier for many organisations to reach widespread audiences with their messaging. In this regard, social media platforms have gained wide recognition and utility in advocacy efforts. Against this backdrop, this article discusses the various methodologies adopted by women-NGOs in Zimbabwe in order to assess their perceived efficacy, in promoting gender parity through audience conscientisation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite women empowerment processes having been emphasized for decades, women in Zimbabwe continue to suffer glaring gender imbalances and disparities, rendering them susceptible to socio-economic challenges such as poverty and domestic violence. This has been attributed mainly to socio-cultural challenges such as patriarchy and a lack of accommodative will (Bishu and Alkadry, 2016 Nhapi, 2022;). The prevalence of these inequalities brings to question the efficacy of the modalities used by women-NGOs and other civic society organisations in information dissemination efforts. This is a developmental gap as far as gender parity is concerned that the Government of Zimbabwe and civic society organisations have been addressing, albeit at a snail's pace (Essof, 2013; Van eerdewijk and Mugadza, 2015; Maposa, 2024). Against this background, the current article explores the various methodologies adopted by women-NGOs in Zimbabwe in order to assess their perceived efficacy, in promoting gender parity.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The study discusses the strategies that women-NGOs adopt in mainstreaming messages to facilitate women empowerment processes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section covers the research approach, methods of data collection, sampling techniques used in the current study. The process of data analysis and ethical considerations are also discussed.

RESEARCH APPROACH, DESIGN, AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The current study adopts a qualitative paradigm to explore the strategies that women-NGOs in Harare use in the transmission of gender messaging aimed at conscientisation of the masses as part of promoting gender parity. The enquiry took the form of a collective case study as a specific design where a few organisations were investigated (Creswell, 2009). These were chosen as they brought to the fore the strategies or methodologies that women-NGOs are implementing for the empowerment of women.

SAMPLING, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

The purposive sampling technique is preferred for both the focus group discussion and key informant participants. This technique was chosen because it ensured the selection of participants that were relevant in answering of the study questions (Ilker *et al.*, 2016). A sample of 20 directors representing women NGOs were selected as part of participants for the focus group discussions. For key informants, one (1) representative each from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Women Affairs, and one (1) Religious and Cultural expert, one (1) political and economic analyst, and one (1) Human Rights expert were selected. In total, 25 participants were interviewed. In collecting data, three focus group discussions, using focus group discussion guides, were carried out with directors from women-NGOs, whereas face-to-face individual interviews, guided by the use of a

semi-structured interview schedule, were conducted with key informants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to ensure that the study fulfils ethical requirements, ethical clearance was sought from the university's Research Ethics Committee. In conducting the study, ethical considerations such as confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and protection from possible harm were upheld (Iphofen, 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the various methods that were found to be popularly used by women-NGOs in their promotion of gender equality messaging. The study findings show that the main methods used include roadshows, songs and film. These sub-themes are discussed below.

STAGING OF ROAD SHOWS BY NGOS TO FIGHT AGAINST GENDER INEQUALITY

While discussing the methods of interventions adopted by women-NGOs to disseminate gender-parity information in Zimbabwe, the research shows that roadshows scored significantly. Some of the NGOs that utilised this strategy indicated that there was a need to 'spice' things up in order to keep people interested in gender issues. Findings reveal that roadshows incorporated informative musical items, dramatization and question- and- answer sessions on gender issues. They also gave away branded t-shirts and hats with messages on women empowerment. Participants also highlighted that through roadshows, they educate societies on women's rights, underscoring the consequences of infringing on other people's rights. Women-NGOs sometimes invited popular figures in order to improve the audience. These roadshows were conducted in mainly local languages in order to

accommodate the audience who could not read or understand English pamphlets.

"We use any platform that can put our message across. We say that you can't stop women with an agenda. Our agenda is gender equality. So, we do anything and everything to reach to people. We are using our comedians, local celebrities to be voices of reason. Even though they are funny people, but through entertainment, we are able to educate communities on the cultural practices that are destroying the girl child and tolerating child marriages and handle incidences of gender-based violence. These entertainers are crowd-pullers and, therefore, make people to listen to our gender messages. So, we don't have one way of doing it, but we do what we can." (NGO1, FGD1)

And

"Roadshows are convenient because we go to the people. The people we use mainly are sort of popular celebrities, so the audience will be everyone; men, women and children etc...which is what we need." (NGO9, FGD2)

And

"In order for them to penetrate the grassroots areas and challenge oppressive practices, they have to get the message out there and roadshows, among other strategies, are very useful." (Religious and Cultural expert, key informant)

The verbatim above speaks of the merits derived from utilising roadshows as a complementary modality for sensitising communities on gender issues. The issue of coverage is very crucial in ensuring inclusivity in the manner in which advocacy for the empowerment of women and the girl child is conducted. The inclusion of all people from the young children to the old, men, and also women, is commendable as it addresses gender information gaps which are usually prevalent when gender mainstreaming is concentrated on women only. The findings above also show that women-NGOs have now become radical in their advocacy strategies as they are targeting cultural and harmful practices that reinforce and perpetuate the subordination of women in societies. Targeting rural areas is a notable strategy as most of the advocacy programmes usually have an urban bias. Rural areas, however, are reservoirs of cultural custodians who,

through socialisation, instil such practices that violate the rights of women and the girl child.

In line with cultural feminism, confronting such practices in an educative instead of a hostile manner is an affirmative action that fosters the empowerment of women (Baehr, 2013; Arora and Chowdhury, 2021). The gras-root approach through roadshows is in line with the principle of broad-based inclusivity enshrined in the National Gender Policy (2013-2017). It allows the demystification of the women empowerment concept, thereby dismantling attitudinal resistance which may be displayed by those who feel threatened by the issue of women empowerment. The formulation of the NGP is, therefore, critical as advocated for by liberal feminism (Mutanana and Bukaliya, 2015; Swank and Fahs, 2017) because it sets the legal foundation upon which programming can be built. The same NGP also highlights the translation of all gender materials into all languages to improve coverage and the retention of gender information. Gender equality, as a global and national goal, also needs community mobilisation and the recognition of diversity in order to educate as many people as is possible.

USING THE ART OF FILM TO SPREAD GENDER PARITY MESSAGING

Closely related to roadshows was the use of films in the fight against gender inequality in Zimbabwe. The findings drawn from NGO participants and supported by key informants reveal film-making has become a key strategy used to communicate about gender parity, especially when promoting messaging that is targeted at dismantling cultural and social barriers to gender parity. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp are popularly used as dissemination channels for short films made by women-NGOs on gender parity. Elaborative information on this mode of intervention unveiled that these films were created out of real-life experiences of survivors. Due to the sensitivity of issues such as

politically-motivated violence, rape, and physical abuse, plays are produced using professional actors and not the actual victims, and then screened in communities. Through story-telling via film, women-NGOs can present the gender sensitive messaging in a powerful, visual and impactful way to shift attitudes and practices.

"It's very simple. You have to know that some issues such as rape, politically-motivated violence, and even physical abuse are highly sensitive matters. The survivors may not be willing to share their story or to be made point of references. So, what we do is that we compile those stories and make a film from them using actors and pseudonyms. We then travel around the country screening those stories to educate people through awareness campaigns as well. This has been working very well, especially during the 2008 violent elections. People can relate better to drama or film than to engage themselves in reading pages upon pages of information. We also post these videos on YouTube and Facebook for easy access, you can check on our page." (NGO 10, FGD2).

"The use of films in communicating issues has always been there. It's just that many organisations have been using the traditional methods until recently." (NGO 13, FGD 2)

"Women's rights are crucial. But sometimes talking about it becomes monotonous if the methods used are dull. So, films preserve information and the identities of the victims." (Human Rights activist, key informant)

The participants' quotes above show the role of film in disseminating gender-information. The beauty of visual images, according to the participants, is that they tend to stay longer in people's minds because they are entertaining, rather than having to read piles of information. Although reading the material may work for some people, screening covers the gap for those who cannot read and those who do not have libraries close to them. As these films are screened from place to place, there is wider coverage, which is critical for the dissemination of information on gender issues. People may relate better to that than they would from mere words by a gender advocate telling people not

to abuse women – the issue of impact is critical. This then justifies and reinforces the authenticity of filmmaking and music in advocating, teaching, and championing equality.

Despite the obvious fact that film-making and music production are expensive avenues (Ureke, 2020), it is an effective way of sending the message across. Specifically, in Zimbabwe, film-makers are facing dire financial constraints with one producer having to sit on a project for over nine years (Nyavaya, 2018). If generic producers are faced with these stumbling blocks, such challenges can be generalised even to include producers utilising film as a platform for gender advocacy. However, as long as the strategy delivers the desired result of women empowerment, the research is convinced that it will be worth the wait and the money even though the current economy of Zimbabwe may not support projects that need huge sums of money (Alao, 2012; Ureke, 2020).

THE USE OF SONGS IN GENDER SENSITIVE MESSAGING

The use of song in promoting gender sensitive messaging that advocates for gender parity was also one of the popular methods observed by the study. The use of songs as a vehicle for promoting social change is a strategic way of spreading gender parity messaging in an engaging and entertaining manner. The use of music that carries a message was hailed for effectively relaying gender-equality mainstreaming messages. All these artistic strategies are maximised in accordance to people's different tastes and preferences. Songs in this regard are therefore used as a way of portraying women's ordeals, challenges, and the forms of injustice they face by virtue of being women in the society. One woman director, referring to the song she wrote as a way of pleading the predicament some women find themselves in said:

“When I wrote the songs, specifically, Ndakateerera (I'm Listening), it was to inform people of the dilemma that befalls a faithful woman between the vows that she made, you know, ‘in health and in sickness, till death do us

part', and the promiscuity of her husband knowing full well that she may be infected with the virus. So, it's more of a plea to God saying, speak to me, what should I do in this situation? At the same time, uhm, I am reminding men of their responsibilities to protect, care, love, and be faithful to their wives as well and not take advantage of their faithfulness. The song was recorded in 2007 at the Grammar Awards and it is available on YouTube as well. Umm, we try to reach as many people as we can. So, yes we use even songs when we can." (FGD1, NGO2)

And

"So, even songs are used to express views on different subjects, be it politics, culture, life, and even gender issues as well - it is not different. People have to hear about it also." (Ministry of Women Affairs, key informant)

Music is presented as a 'universal language', which enables it to effectively communicate desired messages (Singh and Mehr, 2023). Music's social power and its universality is noted, as it cuts across people of different races, cultural confines, and ages. The quotes above also present songs as forms of intercessory prayer to God, which brings hope, comfort, and solace to women who may be facing adversarial challenges in their homes or societies. Music further fulfils one of the gender mainstreaming goals which problematises the targeting of women only in the fight against gender imbalances in society. The findings above indicate the need to get the information not only to women, but also to the whole society, so that women empowerment efforts are inclusive of everyone. This is also in line with the government's mantra that 'no-one must be left behind', which demands that efforts be made to ensure that gender sensitisation should be all-encompassing. Music is, thus, instrumental in neutralising cultural attitudinal resistance and stereotyping, while simultaneously educating societies on the developmental importance of gender equality and women empowerment. This dual role is critical in ensuring that gender parity in Zimbabwe is not just a pipedream, but a goal which can be realised.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have various implications for social work practice, a profession that is anchored on the emancipatory values of participation and empowerment in enhancing the lives of the socially marginalised (Dibbets and Eijkman, 2018). Identifying the strategies implemented by NGOs is the starting point to monitor and evaluate workable strategies to assess the impact and ability of such strategies to usher in a gender-parity dispensation where marginalised women are empowered in Zimbabwe.

The findings reveal that women-NGOs were using roadshows in relaying gender-based information in Zimbabwe. The combination of entertainment and education for advocacy has the potential to have a 'crowd-pulling' effect which is critical for mainstreaming efforts. Roadshows are also instrumental in rectifying an urban bias which is a prevalent developmental anomaly through a more inclusive strategy. Rural areas have the most prevalent rates of culturally oppressive practices and are characterised by resistance to change. It is, therefore, key that these areas be reached with efforts aimed at dismantling cultural and social barriers that negatively affect gender parity. From a social work perspective, inclusive participation yields better results as it provides a sense of ownership for the targeted audiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of change and partnership of societies with women-NGOs (*ibid.*). This is in line with the National Gender Policy of Zimbabwe, which outlines that one of the strategies for conceptualising the policy is to translate it into indigenous languages for easy implementation (Mulenga *et al.*, 2001). The use of celebrities on roadshows may also add validity to the messages, thereby increasing attendance.

As far as the social marketing of gender issues is concerned, Gurrieri and Finn (2023) suggest that the best marketing strategy or tool is one that takes information or services to where it is needed, packaging it in

a way that promotes loyalty. Regarding this, Malagardis (2013) argues that roadshows ought to be tailor-made in order to serve the purpose for which they are intended. With the same reasoning, therefore, if people are more responsive to entertainment, NGOs should utilise methods that captivate the relevant audience for increased participation and impact. This finding finds support from Helman (2012:21) who speaks of 'consciousness-raising groups' as a way of information dissemination. This then calls for partnerships between women-NGOs, social workers, and the entertainment industry in gender programming. Social workers may ensure that the messages are culturally sensitive, age-appropriate, and dignified to allow for accelerated crowd learning. Malagardis (2013) highlights that advocacy is more effective where trained speakers on the subject matter facilitate the programmes.

The idea behind using celebrities at roadshows is that if prominent figures can influence people with their music or acting, they can charismatically influence the attitudes and beliefs of people in relation to gender parity practices. However, Takala (1999) argues that in the event that these celebrities get themselves in situations that contradict what they would have advocated for on roadshows, for example, abusing their wives, some of the audience may take it as an excuse to justify their violence against women pointing out that, "even the celebrities who talked about it beat their wives too. This calls for values of dignity from celebrities that may be considered ambassadors of women-empowerment issues. Also, the advantages of any strategy should be subjected to a cost-benefit-analysis (CBA) matrix to assess its applicability. Methodologies discussed in this study should be subjected to a specified impact assessment process in order to identify their impact implementation gaps and areas that need improvement.

Most efforts targeted at gender equality are learnt largely as a result of socialisation. As such, it may be more effective to include issues of

gender in primary school curricula in order to get children into gender parity attitudes. Engaging children in constructive conversations early in life inculcates in them societal expectations. This would lay a foundation upon which the possibility of gender equality in Zimbabwe can be realised. The learning theory teaches that unlearning behavioural patterns that one might have been socialised into for a long period, can be very challenging (Mafa and Chigwedere, 2025). As such, targeting children at an early age is the most progressive method to ensure a future in which negative gender attitudinal problems can be eradicated.

The findings have also shown that women NGOs use film as an advocacy strategy. Visual story-telling has a compelling effect which has the power to effect behavioural change, and leaves a lasting impression. This means that film connects with the audience emotionally, thereby facilitating a change in someone's perspective on a certain topic through the power of story and characters. Documentary films can educate, raise awareness, and inspire attitudinal change in a person and society at large. The important thing also from a social work perspective is that the identity of the clients behind the story is preserved, a critical principle in the healing process. In many professional fields such as psychology, medicine, and social work practice, there are issues of confidentiality that are held in utmost importance because they encourage clients to speak out without feeling vulnerable or repeatedly victimised (Zastrow, 2010).

Lastly, the findings presents songs as another methodology adopted by women-NGOs. When music is used in advocacy, it ceases to be merely music. It becomes a catalyst and vehicle for social change. It is more than just music and with the right lyrics, rhythm, and instruments, it can move people towards attitudinal change as it can stir strong emotions too, just like films (Singh and Mehr, 2023). Using the media as a gender information-relay instrument to achieve various

kinds of gender equality, goals cannot be over-emphasized as it attracts a wider audience. Social media also helps in forming social values. Therefore, when a culture of gender equality is awash on social media handles, there is a heightened awareness to inspire empathy, engagement, and social activism. Possibly, this is because some media tools are cheaper, efficient, and effective in information relay. This is supported by McPherson (2014) who reveal that globally, more women than men are active on social platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and thereby conveniently giving them direct access to information on gender issues. Nonetheless, Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) warn activists to be cautious of what they call activism fatigue due to information overload on a smaller audience.

Also, films may have their own challenges, because there is a possibility of some survivors experiencing post-stress traumatic disorders (PSTDs) upon seeing similar circumstances they were subjected to in life (Herzog and McNally, 2024). This, therefore, shows that people are diverse, and as such, diversified strategies should be employed to accommodate the various needs of different people. The wider the audience, the more likely it is for people to benefit from services by NGOs. These modern strategies should be balanced off with traditional modalities in order to accommodate people who do not like being on the social media platforms.

Considering that some of these women organisations have offices in the central business district (CBD) of Harare only, and not in other towns or places, the utility of various platforms, as mentioned above, is strategic in spearheading gender-correction discussions for the empowerment of women empowerment around the country. The study also emphasizes that men also need to access this information in order to challenge attitudes and misconceptions that may be breeding the prevalence of gender disparities. The efforts of men organisations

can, therefore, be augmented by women organisations utilising both the print and electronic media.

CONCLUSION

Even though traditional modalities have not been discarded completely, the current study shows that women-NGOs in Zimbabwe are leaning more about of modern methodologies to relay information. It has also proved that every interventional strategy has its own advantages and ramifications, and this calls for the need to adopt various methodologies for increased impact. It is also recommendable that women NGOs target a wider audience in an effort to educate societies on gender issues and the need to empower women without disadvantaging men.

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