

Blogging, feminism and the politics of participation: The case of *Her Zimbabwe*

Abstract

The proliferation of the internet has shown promises and ‘potentials’ of empowering women in ways that are unimaginable in most patriarchal societies. Politics, activism and engagements through technology seem to have been gendered spaces as evidenced by research in the developing world (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Morahan-Martin, 2000). This chapter attempts to demystify this rather ‘silent’ myth, especially in the African context that the internet as well as technological activism and political domains are solely meant for men. To do this, I will discuss activism in support of women’s issues in Zimbabwe through a single case study approach. Specific attention is paid to the website *Her Zimbabwe*, a novel website which attempts to empower women as citizens, giving them a platform to speak on issues otherwise ignored in mainstream media or frowned upon by society. The site uses material from citizen journalists i.e bloggers and readers who comment under blog stories which compose an alternative public sphere to the mainstream one and to a certain extent officialised public sphere dominated by mainstream media. *Her Zimbabwe*, as the name suggests, focuses entirely on women’s issues giving women, as citizens, a platform to speak and articulate their issues which seem to be ignored by society, industry, policy makers and the media. The site has a lot of content on women’s issues especially from ‘feminist’ bloggers. Methodologically this study will use purposive sampling to select material that speaks to issues of women activism since 2012 and these will be subjected to critical discourse analysis, an analytic approach that critiques power, its distribution and imbalances. Theoretically the chapter is anchored on the issue of the voice in counter-digital public spheres.

Introduction

The proliferation of the internet has shown promises and ‘potentials’ of empowering women in ways that are unimaginable in most patriarchal societies. Politics, activism and engagements through technology seem to have been gendered spaces as evidenced by research in the developing world (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Morahan-Martin, 2000). This chapter attempts to demystify this rather ‘silent’ myth, especially in the African context that the internet as well as technological activism and political domains are solely meant for men. To do this, I will discuss activism in support of women’s issues in Zimbabwe through a single case study approach. Specific attention is paid to the website *Her Zimbabwe*, a novel website which attempts to empower women as citizens, giving them a platform to speak on issues otherwise

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There are two main developments that have influenced the way Zimbabweans have addressed the evolution in the socio-economic and political spheres and, in the process, managed to partly disrupt the status quo. Even though the status quo has not been dismantled, the fact is issues that could hitherto not be addressed in public or even in private are now menu for public discourses and consumption speaks volumes about this evolution. These two developments, besides education of course, are migration and technology. This chapter explores how the internet has empowered women to discuss and advance a seemingly prolific 'feminist' agenda in a setting that has for a long time been favourable to patriarchal configurations where politics, activism and engagements in the technological era have continually been gendered and imagined as male spaces (Harris 2008). This is prevalent especially where technological use and activism are structured by gender. This chapter attempts to demystify this rather 'silent' myth – that the internet and anything technological, activism and political are domains solely meant for men. Moreover, this chapter argues that technological advancements and access have opened new vistas for women to advance issues of their collective interest. It is important to hasten to add here that there has not been any research on how issues regarding women empowerment, feminism etc. are discussed online especially in the context of Zimbabwe. Most research focuses on the crisis, politics and if online activism is the area of study, it has been about political engagements and the diaspora (D. Moyo, 2009; L. Moyo, 2009, 2011; Mpfu 2013, 2014a, 2014b; 2016). In addition research from the developed world also helps to cast light on how, at its nascent stages, the internet has predominantly been a male domain (Keller, 2012; Harris 2008; Morahan-Martin, 2000) and when women have been 'let in' their participation has had different value attached to it (Harris, 2008).

Scholars such as Newsom and Lengel (2012: 31) have looked at how Arab women have used the internet to advance their cause and realised that “gendered messages are constructed, essentialized, reconstructed, and made invisible by the consumer media system.” The current set-up of media in Zimbabwe does not advance women’s interests. Men dominate both in the news both as staffers producing the news and as news sources. There are few female editors in most media houses in Zimbabwe. There are few senior ranking editorial appointments for females such as Victoria Ruzvidzo who is *Zimpapers* (government controlled stable of newspapers) managing editor, Elizabeth Mushonga who is the general manager of the provincial *Zimpapers* title *Manica Post* and Susan Makore is the Chief Executive Officer of a private radio station, *ZIFM Stereo*. Otherwise most women are employed as journalists, sub-editors or desk editors, features or supplements editors without much influence on final content. This has an influence on the coverage and angling of stories pertaining to women’s concerns.

The major problem in this research is that traditional or mainstream public spheres disempower women through (mis)representation, in that the agenda is set and management mostly done by men. Machirori argues that *Her Zimbabwe* has an important space to occupy in this regard while noticing that women’s positive representation “remains perilously low with women still occupying scant positions of authority in newsrooms and news media organisations. At the same time as we see a sharp rise in political alarmism in the mainstream media, we also [notice] the rise in hypersexualised and sexist content which is derisive towards women” (Interview, 23 February 2016). Thus the voices and issues of women are not only silenced or delegitimised through such coverages but there is a lack of gender sensitivity in Zimbabwe’s male-dominated newsrooms.

As Harris (2008) suggests, women’s activism is policed and supervised by men who are in power and this usually excludes women from voicing their issues ‘outside formal politics’ from which they are also disempowered. Of course, in Zimbabwe, for example, there has been an ‘improvement’ in advancing women politically (we have seen an increase in the number of legislators for instance) but there has not been an inspiring deployment and employment of women in positions of influence in parastatals, industry, army, media, academy and the like. In January and February 2016, for example, the government owned mainstream daily newspapers *The Herald* and *The Chronicle* respectively ran a story and a cartoon that spoke to issues of gender, sexuality and identity and this could be an illustration of the dangers to women’s misrepresentation in the male dominated media spaces.

In the first instance as shown in *Figure 13.1* below, *The Herald*, in reference to a hoax story emanating from a Kenyan newspaper suggesting that all men in Eritrea were being required by government to marry more than one woman ran a picture of what appeared to Eritrean women with a caption reading thus: “No argument there, the Eritrean girls look good. Even the worst looking would definitely be a beauty queen here in Zimbabwe, (no offence to our bleached, weaved and over-painted sisters” (*The Herald*, 30/01/2016). *Figure 13.2* shows *The Chronicle* cartoon by Wellington Musapenda (04/02/2016) who was subsequently suspended for breaching protocol by not running it through his editorial team shows a pornographic depiction of tribalism and sexism all entangled together with two supposedly isiNdebele speaking women reacting to the low academic performance by their regional high schools. There has always been an age-old stereotypical, pejorative and demeaning perception that Ndebele speaking people are dull and all their women are good at is prostitution. These issues were raised and debated on social media but their discussion in mainstream media remained narrow most probably because of gender and ethnic biases that characterise newsrooms or a preoccupation with Zimbabwe’s unfolding political drama playing itself out in the shaky ruling party.

Figure 13.1 here

Figure 13.2 here

At the pith of this research is the argument that it is time we noticed the important role technology-enabled conversations play to those powerless or voiceless and, in most cases, majority members of society. These techno-voices and conversations “represent new directions in activism, the construction of new participatory communities (and cultures), and the development of new kinds of public selves” (Harris, 2008: 482). Harris, who was writing on young women’s participation on political issues using the internet in the American context, noticed that in most cases it is challenging especially for women to construct “public selves at a time when young female citizenship is operationalized through consumption and display rather than political agency” (2008: 483) and intellectual engagement with issues of the day and those that affect women especially.

Research design, method

In this chapter I grapple with activism for women's issues through a single case study approach. Robert Yin, the foremost proponent of this approach defines it as a scientific inquiry that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (2003: 13). A case study is quintessential in this research as it attempts to understand, holistically, cultural systems in situ. A case study is helpful in satisfying three pillars of any research and these are: understanding, describing and explaining phenomenon.

The case

Her Zimbabwe which is a brainchild of Fungai Machirori who started it in 2012 after graduation from the British University Reading. She says it came from "an idea from my Masters dissertation which explored Zimbabwean women's movement building across different geographical spaces... As one of my recommendations, I suggested that new media could play a role in a more robust movement building across space. And this is the recommendation I implemented..." (Interview, 23 February 2016). Zimbabwe has a number of women-centric organisations like Musasa which works towards eradicating gender based violence, Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association which seeks to create a legal environment that empowers women and children, Women's Action Group which advances women and girl child's rights and a network of women rights activists called Women Action Group among others. These have been dormant and not vocal about issues bedevilling Zimbabwean women on a daily basis owing to political threats, lack of funding and in some cases narrow avenues to engage society leaders. *Her Zimbabwe's* innovative use of the internet to amplify women's concerns is groundbreaking.

Her Zimbabwe, just like many other sites born in the diaspora that have attempted to advance democratic deliberations (Mpofu, 2014), attempts to empower women as citizens, giving them a platform to speak on issues otherwise ignored in male dominated mainstream media and newsrooms or frowned upon by society. Machirori argues that her website's exclusion of men is not necessarily "...segregation against men because the mainstream media, and so much [media coverage] focuses on men or areas that are traditionally perceived to be the preserves of men. It can't be a segregation 'against' if the group that is being omitted... holds a special position and privilege in society" (Interview, 23 February 2016). The site uses material from citizen journalists i.e bloggers and reader input. Citizen journalism is a form of "storytelling

which moves from seeing journalism as a lecture but as a conversation where everyday people assume power and take charge and be influential in telling their stories from their own perspectives, through blogs, reader comments, email list-servs etc” (Mpofu, 2015: 87). Most bloggers are young, university degreed, urbane women. *Her Zimbabwe* is an alternative counter public sphere to the mainstream public sphere and to a certain extent officialised public sphere dominated by mainstream media. This characterisation draws from Fraser’s (1992: 116) conceptualisation of different types of alternative public spheres – ‘counter publics’ which are parallel arenas for discourse contesting the historically “exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech”.¹*Her Zimbabwe* gives women, as citizens, a platform to debate, challenge patriarchy and amplify their issues of concern which are ignored by political or traditional leaders, society, industry, policy makers and the media. But the critical question is, bearing in mind that most non-governmental organisations in Zimbabwe are reliant on donor funding, *amplifying for who and to what effect?* The site’s content is largely from ‘feminist’ bloggers to satisfy what Machirori says is a “particular deficiency in documenting Zimbabwean women’s history. So this is why *Her Zimbabwe*, and not ‘Our Zimbabwe’ or ‘His Zimbabwe’” (Interview 23 February 2016). It makes it clear, however, that men are ‘secondary audiences’. The administration of the site includes three women and a man who is a finance officer.

Her Zimbabwe’s aim to harness:

...the potential of digital media to share and tell Zimbabwean women’s stories, as well as nurture young women’s digital activism. *Her Zimbabwe*’s primary target audience is Zimbabwean women aged 20-35, although participation and contributions are accepted from women of all ages. Understanding that outcomes for women are increased by improving outcomes for society, *Her Zimbabwe* also targets men as a secondary audience. As women’s issues cannot be separated from those of the men with whom they co-exist as partners, relatives, friends, work colleagues, the *Her Zimbabwe* website features a ‘His Zimbabwe’ section which allows men to express their viewpoints and stances on issues to with gender and equity.

The above suggests the site is exclusionary of the mostly disconnected and offline 0-19 and the 36+ year age groups delivering us into a debate of ethical dilemma on representation and speaking on behalf of those considered ‘others’ in one’s community. This is to suggest that while it is welcome to speak for ‘others’ this could best be done within the confines of ethical representation and involvement without reproducing the same “hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions” (Hinterberger, 2007: 74) characteristic of patriarchal settings that feminist movements are challenging for instance. Even my writing of this chapter needs to

¹ Fraser, N. 1992. Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In: C. Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 109 – 142.

be tempered by an awareness that I may not fully grasp the ‘others’ whose struggles and creative ways of challenging patriarchy I am pontificating on. *Her Zimbabwe*’s activities include:

Amplifying women’s voices online: *Her Zimbabwe*’s mainstay is its website through which the sharing of personal narratives, social commentary and perspectives on gender has been promoted. The website is supported by robust conversation and interaction via *Her Zimbabwe*’s social media channels.

Stimulating conversation: Understanding the need to also promote discussion in the offline realm, *Her Zimbabwe* hosts a series of talks termed ‘Critical Conversations’ as a means to bring together bloggers, journalists, opinion leaders and activists to discuss issues that pertain to the media and technology environment, both locally and internationally. These speaks (sic) convene influential media and technology leaders, and the general public, to discuss, debate and critique issue of relevance to the sectors they represent.

Promoting literacy in digital storytelling and security: Another of the gaps *Her Zimbabwe* is filling is to bridge the digital access divide through building and strengthening women’s online content production skills.

Despite targeting women evidence from this research suggests men also contribute to the website and their men’s contributions do not represent the ‘mainstream’ patriarchal views on feminism. They, just like women writers, attempt to dismantle patriarchy and the status quo they argue suppresses women.

Method and questions

Methodologically this study will use purposive sampling to select material that speaks to issues of women activism since 2012 and these will be subjected to critical discourse analysis, an analytic approach that looks at power, its distribution and imbalances. Friker (2008: 200) defines purposive sampling as a “type of convenience sampling which the researcher selects the sample based on his or her judgement” while Krippendorff (2004: 119) further adds that “relevance sampling... aims at selecting all textual units that contribute to answering given research questions ... [since] the resulting sample is defined by the analytical problem at hand”. Purposive sampling is flexible as it can be used in “even less structured ways without the application of any random sampling” (Friker, 2008: 200).

This research follows questions around the first of these three core activities. It questions the viability of a gendered space in ‘fighting’ against a system that is oppressive to women. Does this call for the ‘oppressors’ exclusion or for a conversation and what parameters should be set for the conversation to obtain? Again the research questions the ethics and use of an alternative digital public sphere that is elitist in a country ravaged by poverty where the mostly affected women are the poor, illiterate, in the rural areas, have no social capital, technological know-how and economic access to arenas of debate and, even if they had to have access, their

dimensions of social experience would bring with them the burden of values attached to modes of participation in society (Harris, 2008). The risk often becomes the transference of offline and often patriarchal social and political practices into the new domain. Further, the research gauges the effectiveness of such a website through the levels and intensity of debates on blogs. Lastly what issues affect women and how are these raised and debated in *Her Zimbabwe*?

Theory: Technology, voice and changing paradigms of participatory practices

Where women's voices are constrained, the internet has given them a voice, that is, an online voice where internet-based platforms are used to freely "explore contemporary feminism and articulate their own perspectives" (Keller, 2012: 430). In so doing they assert themselves into a space where they make arguments to be seen as equal and serious socio-political actors and agential citizens. The concept of the voice as articulated by Mitra empowers those marginalised members of the community into gaining a "heteroglossic and hyperconnected" voice (2001: 29) that could be used to "voice the unspeakable stories and eventually construct powerful connections that can be labelled as 'cyber communities,'" (2001: 30) with other people sharing similar interests. Mitra (2001: 30) further asserts that "it is far more crucial to understand how the internet can, (1) open up the possibility of having a voice, (2) produce alliances (aka cyber communities) with unique characteristics, and (3) how the "combination of voice and cyber community can help to renegotiate identities in a structured social system." For a long time most women, especially in developing contexts with subordinate/dominant structurations, find themselves under the category of the marginalised, subordinate and disempowered members in society without a voice on matters affecting them. Instead of speaking up for themselves these subordinate and marginalised women are spoken for and the systems that have made this possible continuously neglect questioning such structures of representation as the media. However one has to question if indeed having a voice on issues that affect women in *Her Zimbabwe* debates is actually considered as having a place "at the table and utilizing that place to be heard and acknowledged" (Mitra, 2001: 31) in the broader society. Women have succeeded at problematizing the centres of power in society through using new technologies whose immediacy and interconnectivity disrupt the 'traditional' flow and ordering of things.

This 'traditional' flow and ordering of things has upheld a culture where women occupy a position where they could only be seen and not heard and – to draw from Keller's assessment of how young girls communicate online – are "encouraged to be political in appropriate" and patriarchally approved and supervised ways, "while being excluded from formal [socio-] political arena due to (gender) based exclusions and patriarchal constructions of activism that

privilege formal [male-dominated] political activities” (2012: 435). Women’s communicative spaces then therefore become alternative to the mainstream and they then occupy a subaltern status as a counter-public. Writing about subaltern public spheres Squires (2002) argues that there are three formats they take; counter-public, enclave and satellite. I position *Her Zimbabwe* under the counter-public because, while it addresses issues related to women it remains open and accessible to those it is not intended for – men. It operates on the side-lines of traditional public spheres manned and dominated by men that deny women a voice.

New media technologies have not only given women a voice but have helped alter our traditional understandings and configurations of space and time while also creating a community of counter-publics that may share, to a certain extent, some commonalities entering the communicative space as empowered and agential citizens. But which women are we speaking about? The suburban and connected or rural and disempowered ones? Machirori dismisses the notion of *Her Zimbabwe* being an elitist project thus:

We have never presumed to represent all women’s voices. Being an online platform in a country with limited access to online tools, this would be a gross overestimation of our capacity. It’s a reductive argument that believes that someone is ‘elite’ merely by the fact of their access to online tools and spaces. Would we instantly identify an unemployed young graduate who spends the little money they get from their parents (or by selling second hand clothes at a market) to buy data bundles as an elite? Being online is becoming more of a necessity nowadays as it links us to opportunity and widens our communication base. As such, being online cannot be narrowly constructed as a pursuit of the elite alone. Conversely, to assume that the so-called elite women do not have issues that require redress is another myth that needs debunking. (Interview, 23 February 2016).

Despite this limited scope, new media activism has allowed us to “productively rethink of [women] as active agents, cultural producers and citizens rather than passive victims and cultural dupes in the online world” (Keller, 2012: 440). However, it is not my argument here that by being agential subaltern counter-publics women are ‘binarised’ with and against the mainstream. Admittedly women are empowered differently and cannot be taken as homogeneous collective affected by patriarchy in uniform ways. Most problematically is the targeted population by *Her Zimbabwe* if one was to engage with the meaning and significance of ‘Zimbabwe’ in the name. The website targets women between the ages of 20 to 35 those deemed, in a way, ungovernable. It seems this age-group has the means to access and interact online such as an education, hardware and economic means to ‘purchase’ their entry online. As one blogger Vimbai Chinembiri says “the writers are drawn from upper middle class. This is probably by virtue of level of education and not necessarily because of background as content shows...” (E-mail communication, 5 May 2016). This brings us to the discussion on the effects

of structural inequalities on online participatory practices. Watkins (2009) argues that access to technologies or ‘digital gates’ permits or restricts access to maintain disparities between race and class power relations online for example.

Digital divide or the opening of these ‘digital gates’ is informed by the location, class and techno-literacy of the women. Zimbabwe’s current economic status does not positively influence people into prioritising informational needs when there are bread and butter issues to worry about. In addition, government interference into ordinary people’s online communications has, to a certain extent, hindered participation. Access to the internet stood at 34 percent in Zimbabwe whose population is believed to be around 15 million (Mhlanga and Mpofu, 2014). Growth in access has been influenced by the importation of “cheap Chinese mobile gadgets, a recent reduction in mobile telephony rates and the expansion of the network by the country’s three mobile operators” (Mpofu, 2015: 8). It should also be noted that in as much as the internet opens up vistas of communication and empowerment for women it can also be a landmine. Moraha-Martin (2000: 68) argues that “the impact of the internet for women is not all positive. The internet also has created and amplified problems for women. Women have been targets of online oppression, harassment, and some have become real life victims because of their online participation.” The following section engages with *Her Zimbabwe’s* discussions in blogs casting light on one of its main objectives of amplifying women’s voices.

An analysis of *Her Zimbabwe* blogs and the politics of gender

My main focus here is to engage with the objective that the website sets for itself, that of amplifying the voices of women online. There are two suggestions raised by this objective. Firstly, women are speaking but their voices are not loud or prominent enough to be heard. Secondly, it could be deduced from the statement that very few of them are speaking and not heard or if heard are ignored. This analysis is done in tandem with the considerations of networked spaces, mostly dominated by men, as arena for fighting for freedom and the exclusionary nature not of the spaces alone but of the focus of the website in dealing with women’s issues in Zimbabwe. The main assumption and contention in this section, which also forms the core of this chapter is that a speaking or writing subject on issues of feminism in *Her Zimbabwe* assumes a posture and occupies a space of power and authority “which requires a commitment to an ethical involvement in the representation of ‘others’” (Hinterberger, 2007: 74). To highlight this, one of the bloggers, Vimbai Chinembiri, observes that most of the

bloggers “have an above average level of education compared to most women in Africa or the women who are the subject of most of the writings” (E-mail Communication, 5 May 2016).

The current chapter uses 51 purposely sampled articles from the inception of the website until February 2016. These address a variety of issues regarding women’s issues like sexuality, women’s rights, child marriages, sport, violence and equality. Most blogs were contributed by women and very few have reader comments under them. This could mean two things: that readers do not critically engage with issues raised or they do so on the website’s *Facebook* page which replicates and updates stories as they are uploaded on the website.

It is possible that most women rights activists in Zimbabwe aim to dismantle the oppressive cultures that suppress women. Hence Pretty Chavango’s blog post, *Gender roles run deep*, is critical as it speaks to the need for women to “learn to traverse timidity, gender insensitivity and reality in order to break free from social norms and find success” (*Her Zimbabwe*, 9 July 2015). She further observes that societal power configurations favour boys and men more than they do women and girls. To illustrate this she claims that

*This society taught its sons that you need not worry about satisfying your women; they can do with little sex if at all. The **biggest mistake** my society made is that they told their boys that they can have sex with whoever they want whenever they want... go home and forget to satisfy their wives. Women have had to live with that kind of suffering for a very long time.... When a woman sees a wrongly and provocatively dressed man she is moved, but she looks aside. When you move around with your chest bare and your shorts too tight as a man, know that you are offending some women somewhere. Just that they were taught to pretend it’s not happening. Just as much as you are moved by a wrongly dressed woman or a provocatively dressed one, women actually do feel things...The same way you do. Just that our fathers taught our mothers to teach us to look aside.* (Emphasis in the original)

Societies that are patriarchal have presented women through “long established cultural stereotypes” (Wood 2007, 259) of what it means to be women and feminine as demonstrated by *The Herald* story and picture above. These feminine ideals are, as suggested in the quotation above, cultural expectations of women to be sex objects, submissive and passive whereas men are expected to be aggressive, macho and exude a sense of power. The ‘acculturation’ of women into passivity, silence and submissiveness is succinctly exposed in a comment to Chivango’s blog by *Rue* who summarises society in her perceptions thus:

Its funny that nomatter how much you try to involve women in activities that will enhance them still they choose to be reserved and not participate. The reason being the society has taught our women to be content with what they have, that's why you find many women in abusive marriages still stay in them because they have been taught be content and strive on. But at times its not about striving on but about your happiness and success. If more women would only realise how much potential they have and stand for themselves and by so doing stand for others. Our society has over-emphasized the importance of men and yet forgetting that without the women men would not exist and most probably would not have the lives they have. After all men succeed to impress us!!! [sic] (*Her Zimbabwe*, 9 July 2015).

The above suggests the taken-for-grantedness the gendered roles and positions society has allocated to different sexes. Reference could be made to the hoax Eritrean story referred to above. Anthea Taderera's blog *On Eritrea: When We Make a 'Joke' of Forced Marriage* captures salient issues regarding women's commodification, 'thingification' – that is, being made into things of not much value, objectification and evils of forced marriages that tend to be overlooked as:

Zimbabweans took to social media to discuss the 'news', shared links to Eritrean visa offices as well as screenshots/images of fake partially completed visa applications, 'jokingly' checked into Eritrean airports on 'national duty', engaged in casual collective misogynoir, downplayed the horror of forced marriage and commodified women... This callous response was particularly disappointing given the conversations around marriage, particularly the importance of being able to *consent* to marriage that we've been having as a result of the continued fight against child 'marriage'. (Taderera, 11 February 2016, emphasis in the original)

Activities online are viewed as negative because it seems those who participated in the fun did not think deeply about the story and what it means to women's rights and their treatment in a continent where they are treated as second class citizens. Women, as a semiotic reading of most reactions on social media and mainstream media suggests, are meant to be attractive sex objects, be there to satisfy men and always subordinate. In terms of physical looks there is a perception that most African settings encourage women to be 'curvy' and, as Chamunorwa Mufaro argues in her blog post entitled *Not curvy, not beautiful?* (5 October 2015):

Africa has always appreciated the curvy woman with the full figure associated with fertility, health and affluence... just take a look at the language that our own African literary discourse uses to describe a beautiful African woman... (In) Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 1964 classic 'Weep Not Child' ... Ngotho's idea of a good wife is a "fleshy, black body with sweat." In Chimamanda Adichie's ... 'Half of a Yellow Sun' ... lead character, Olanna, is painted with a sensually stimulating edibility... (with a) "curvy fleshy body" that is like "a yellow cashew, shapely and ripe". Her beauty is in the arch of her hips, the lusciousness of her bosom, the plumpness of her derriere and the thickness of her thighs.

This contrasts with Vimbai Midzi's arguments in her *Sex and the City: respectability, womanhood and decency* (23 June 2015) blog "[W]omen are therefore held to standards of expressing sexuality within the confines of what men like, expect and will tolerate. Sex (note that this only applies to women) is seen as a sacrosanct gift from God. Our bodies are not seen as our own." It is common cause that in most patriarchal African settings, Zimbabwe included, women have to express their sexuality within the confines of what men – through patriarchal configurations of sexuality – like, expect, decree and tolerate. Social media activities and some celebrities for instance advance self-sexualised images where the body parts of females are given more prominence than other capabilities they might have. This is the currency of beauty some society give prominence. Mufaro further observes, through experience and conversations

in her (narrow) family setting that all this assumed beauty in an African woman is not meant for her, but for the consumption of the male species both as gazers and consumers as “boys like a little more booty to hold at night” (Mufaro, 2015). In relation to the Eritrean story, Taderera further accentuates this objectification while also debunking the ‘thick’ woman myth as a homogeneous expectation of all African men thus:

The attractiveness of Eritrean women soon became the main topic of discussion. Men came out of the woodworks to tell us they wouldn’t mind two wives *who looked like that*. One skit circulating on whatsapp called Zimbabwean women cows, as opposed to the ‘objectively’ desirable Eritrean women who were presented as a homogenous group of caramel skinned women with long straight flowing hair, thin but sufficiently... This framing is appalling as it ignores the diversity of black peoples... Eurocentric beauty norms are being applied... There is, therefore, no room for a multiplicity of beauty, or for challenging the idea that there is a single beauty standard that women must achieve or attempt to adhere to in order to validate our gender identities. Further there was the continuous implication that any form of beauty ritual was for the benefit for the male gaze and not perhaps because women found personal pleasure in their adornment... Women are thought of as things. A wife is apparently a thing... The entire conversation was quite telling, as not once even in passing was women’s emotional and domestic labour in traditional heterosexual relationships mentioned. All that work continued to go unnoticed, expected as a given and yet still devalued. It was a very clear indication that for all our claims to be fairly progressive in the area of marriage we continue to look at interpersonal relationships with an uncritical eye and are comfortable following patriarchy’s entrenched norms.

Of course this cannot be a universal conversation but it touches some experiences of Zimbabwean women and societies. The media and society have equally attempted and in some cases managed to create two binary images of women, the good and the bad. Those women that are virgins at the time of marriage are mostly considered good compared to those who are not or have children outside wedlock. Bloggers, to some could be bad girls. Chinembiri observes that sometimes ideas some bloggers especially “mostly single women tend to clash with those of married women who often contribute through comments although there is a general consensus on some issues” (E-mail Communication 5 May 2016) and in some cases men ‘confront’ bloggers accusing them of misleading other women. The bloggers debate and are not agreed on the commoditization of women through *lobola*. This is demonstrated by Mufaro’s (2015) blog where she speaks about her aunts when they “... beam with anticipation at the prospects of charging high *lobola* (bride price) for my cousins who are well endowed with ‘assets’... As for me, I weigh a little below 50 kgs and I have a petite frame. My aunts ‘console’ me by telling me that at least I am educated and intelligent.” The concept of *lobola* has been differently dealt with by some feminist bloggers on *Her Zimbabwe*. One argument is that women are taken as property to be auctioned where men sit and decide how much a woman who is about to get married is worth.

In *Lobola: to pay or not to pay?* Keith Mundangepfupfu (9 July 2015) a male blogger, argues that the *lobola* practice oppresses and commodifies women giving men undue power. Some reader comments under the blog are critical, presenting the need to maintain those cultures labelled backward in this modern world. These are highlighted below:

Tadzoka: I think it is important to note the difference between the bastardization of *lobola*, and *lobola* proper. The author did briefly highlight the distinction, however, the argument sweepingly blamed the institution of *lobola* for its abuse. Would it be fair for us to blame religion for terrorism? Indeed, not. We should blame the people who abuse the institution. *Lobola* is meant to be an exchange creating a family bond.

Morris M: I think the argument is very faulty. Just because some men view their wives as their possessions thru paying *Lobola*, there are many others who respect and consult their wives in all important decisions they make. And its a token of appreciation, everyone who believes is marrying a good wife MUST pay *lobola*. [sic]

In response to Mundangepfupfu, Vimbai Chinembiri's *Why I want lobola as part of my marriage* blog argues that *lobola* is important to her as:

being the self-assured feminist that I am, I am certain that the kind of man who should marry me would be the kind who has respect and love for me, and the family I come from... I want him and his family to send a munyayi (negotiator) to my family to ask for 'sadza' (asking for mealie thick porridge, that is my hand in marriage). I want him to adhere to the grocery list that my family will draft for the marriage ceremony. I want the visitors to pfunya chisero (bending their knees like females and sitting on the goat-skin mat in a way they would do while addressing a chief to whom respect is due) on a nice mat while my family lounges on the couches. They should call me and ask me if I know 'these people'. I want to enjoy being identified among my sisters as the young woman they have come to marry, and my parents should be blessed with zvireverere zva Mai na Baba (portions for *lobola* that go directly to the bride's parents). (9 October, 2015)

This suggests something deeper, in terms of relationships, than the 'cosmetic' arguments on commercialisation and commoditisation of women. She suggests that it is about creation of family bonds and commitment between families. Also, this shows that the bloggers in Her Zimbabwe are not of the same mind. Their views of and on feminism are not narrow and straight-jacketed fitting all. It is crucial also to say that even though there are disagreements in some instances, there is general consensus in some issues. The editorial team, however, wields power in as far as gatekeeping is concerned. For example Chinembeiri recalls how her blog was rejected "because it sort of made excuses for wife beaters. However my intention was to look at abuse from the perspective of the abuser" (E-mail Communication 5 May 2016).

Issues of power, class, law and sex are also tackled by the website as advocacy for women and girl-children's rights. In a blog post '*Fast girls*', *Tomana and the age of consent* (02 July 2015) Taderera contends with the court-set age of consent of 12 years and the controversial remarks by Zimbabwe's Prosecutor-General Johannes Tomana to the effect that 'let the children get married, because they're poor and what are they doing with their lives anyway?!' Further, Taderera observes that instead of condemning Tomana's reckless statement and the practice of child marriage, society condemns young girls caught up in child marriages or under age sexual intercourses as 'fast girls'. Taderera suggests that society sees these 'fast girls' as responsible for trapping men into sexual relationships. She argues:

What has been particularly disheartening for me in the past few weeks is seeing the extent to which the myth of the ‘fast girl’ who goes around waylaying innocent *adult* men, forcing them to have sex with her is ingrained in the psyches of many. *Men who have sex with children are being presented as hapless victims of feminine wiles as opposed to the predators that they are.* (Emphasis supplied)

In most cases society lays the burden of blame on women when they are raped and most often than not victim-blaming borders on issues of their sexually enticing dressing to being in spaces where they ‘know’ full well they are not supposed to be. Sex, it seems, is not something women have to negotiate on rather men are left with all the power to interpret and decide whether or not to engage in any form of sexual relationship with a woman: be it consensual or rape. The argument by Tomana above that girls have to be married at a tender age because of poverty brings into play issues of class. Middle class and well-off families that can afford to send their girl-children to school and cater for them are safe. The poor can get married to escape poverty and this perpetuates the cycle of poverty and abuse of those considered poor. Taderera rightly points out that “[W]e are callously content to leave certain segments of society behind,” and there is need for legislative transformation for the sake of all citizens. The intervention made by Tsitsi Chivango on *Gender Equality: An Important Tool for Sustainable Development* (30 July 2015) is revealing² particularly the conclusion that despite Zimbabwe “...being a signatory to gender-sensitive instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the famous Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (which people like quoting but know very little about), the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, our road to equality is still a long way ahead.”

Most bloggers do not only mourn about the oppressive nature of society without offering any solutions for what they see as problems. For instance, Midzi ends her blog posting thus,

[T]he stereotypes and gender roles we have allowed to flourish in our society inhibit the ability of women to be full, rights-bearing citizens. We have allowed culture and religious beliefs to supersede the protection of our girls’ rights ... allowed the male gaze to determine how women’s sexuality should be expressed. Our lawmakers must be made aware of the weaknesses of the law, and the extent to which these laws are harmful to women and girls. Beyond that, our society needs to change. We need to teach our girls that marriage does not add intrinsic value to their lives. (Midzi, 2015)

In a blog entitled *Why Can Men Sex Freely, But Women Can’t?* Lazurus Sauti concludes by offering the following as solutions “Therefore, communities need intervention programmes that change the attitudes of men, women and society at large ... there must be educational programmes for young men and women that dispel unhealthy and unequal representations of

² Chivango, Tsitsi. 2015. *Gender Equality: An Important Tool for Sustainable Development*, Available at: <http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/2015/07/gender-equality-an-important-tool-for-sustainable-development/> [Last Accessed: 27 April 2016]

women... there must be space for young men, in particular, to learn about sex, sexuality and healthy relationships in an open way and at a young age” (25 November 2015).

The themes raised above demonstrate the differences between western and African feminisms. This could be informed by the fact that their struggles are different. Chinembiri puts it this way: “writers (African bloggers) struggle with different issues that are not entirely big issues in the western world... education for young girls, *lobola* debates, sanitary wear provision, harassment in public places...”

Concluding remarks

While it could be argued that in most Zimbabwean societies power distribution favours men more than it does women and that “women worldwide have been last to come online” (Morahan-Martin 2000, 683) there seems to be potential of creating and starting conversations about issues pertinent to women. While some stories and blogs are analytical and largely informed by information and statistics released by such reliable agencies of the United Nations, African Union, World Bank etc, most of the bloggers rely on rather narrow familial or generalised take on societal issues to construct arguments. This creates ethical issues in and of representation in that familial surroundings and experiences are taken for granted as experiences of most societies in Zimbabwe. The issues around *lobola* and marriage or the preferred size of women by African men for instance, suffice as highlights of this problematic. Morahan-Martin (2000, 685) then suggests that [C]ritical thinking abilities are essential for internet users... [they] need to learn to evaluate the information they find online”. Not only do readers need to be critical, but those who compose the content too. However this does not preclude the positive impact of the fact that women ‘are starting’ to speak online. Online communication has democratised the way we have known communication in patriarchal settings where women are meant to be silent and where their issues are involved they have minimal input and the larger part of decisions are made by men. Thus online communication frees society from the tyrannies of face to face (f2f) communication leading to people conversing as equals outside the boundaries set by f2f communication which pay attention to race, gender, sex, class, social status and the like. On the flip side this does not diminish the digital divide between the techno-haves and the techno-poor, continuations of f2f communicative patterns online, occupational hazards and inequalities of online agitation in Zimbabwe. Rather, it amplifies these disparities pointing to the fact that power resides; more

often than not, with men. The fact that policy makers are excluded from online conversations acts as a drawback too.

Again, the fact that the website attempts to present the voices of the youthful and urbane women leads to the exclusion of other women who some of the bloggers and news reports attempt to speak for in generalised ways. For instance, issues of the poor children being given out for marriage as an attempt to poverty alleviation by their parents, guardians or communities remain silenced while men (officials) and bloggers (women with access to the internet) speak on their behalf or for them. While the practice is retrogressive, there is need for thorough research and to give prominence to these marginalised people's voices whose rights and agenda is foregrounded by such platforms as *Her Zimbabwe*. Of course this would be a difficult feat considering the strains placed on the *Her Zimbabwe* by funders in a context where political and economic decline and donor fatigue have made it difficult for independent media organisations to cover issues affecting especially those in remote areas of the country. While the bloggers challenge the operations of society under patriarchal dominance, they help to reinforce "contemporary notions of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality and power" (Devoss 2000, 835) in some instances. For instance Vimbai Chinembiri's post on *lobola* clearly demarcates and takes for granted the role men and women play in determining the future of the woman who is about to get married. Another aspect ignored in the discussions on the blogs is that of same sex marriages and relationships are considered taboo in Zimbabwe. Chinembiri argues that this is so because of the differences between African and western feminisms. She responded to e-mailed interview questions thus: "[F]eminism beliefs by most writers are situated in the Zimbabwean context where there is little room for extremism. I would call it grounded feminism informed by a cultural background". The question is what is lost or gained by silences around this issue?

Her Zimbabwe promises to play a pivotal role in advancing women's issues and amplifying those faint or solitary voices that shed light on the plight of women through off-line programmes. In 2014 the organisation started what they call 'critical conversation' after observing that, according to Machirori, "Zimbabwe... has, for a long time, been closed off from a lot of issues and conversations – as a result of our politics – [and this gives us an opportunity] to...interact with different ideas, views and opinions... [While] online space facilitates conversation brilliantly, the face to face encounters are still just as valid, if not even more, as they allow space for collective introspection, follow up and more elaborate explanation]" (Jena, 2014). The realities of poverty and digital divide seem neglected by Jena who seems to take

internet accessibility for granted in country like Zimbabwe when she says “[B]esides being an easy to penetrate platform, the internet also permits certain liberties that are generally not available in other forms of media. For example, one just needs internet access, some technological knowhow and a gadget to start an online conversation.” The tools to access the internet, that is computers and modems, skills to manipulate the soft- and hardware come at a cost in a country whose economic environment propel every citizen who happens to be lucky to get a dollar to ‘invest’ on bread and butter than informational and activist needs and projects.

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