Buwa!

YOUTH IN AFRICA
Dominant & Counter Narratives

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YOUTH IN AFRICA: Dominant & Counter Narratives

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“Young women had to explore ways to negotiate their power and space, but they also had to almost justify why they had to be in the women’s movements and why they needed to create safer spaces to connect and interact. The sisters who had formed the women’s movements struggled with the notions of legacy and transition.” Grace Chirenje
This Issue of *BUWA* interrogates – from a feminist perspective – the current narratives on youth on the African continent. Understood in this context as a series or groups of stories that are told by individuals and groups as part of a causal set of events, narratives play a significant role in shaping the politics of the day in any given society. They give an insight into how people make sense of their lives and if recounted often enough and not challenged, they become dominant perspectives that develop ideologies and influence how people interpret and understand the world around them. They often become the basis for constructing social meaning, shaping policies, allocating resources, accessing and defending political positions, as well as determining solutions to given personal, group and national problems.

However, where these dominant narratives are challenged, new ones often emerge, usually constructed to offer counter views that can result in different courses of action. This implies that through narratives – or collectives of stories – ideologies are shaped, challenged, and new meaning is constructed around the realities and experiences of particular groupings in given contexts. It also means that when they become part of a narrative, stories are political as they can potentially shift power dynamics, depending on how they are told, who tells them, for what reasons, and – perhaps more importantly – to what audiences and with what effect.

In this volume, we explore how power and the politics of space and voice are – if at all – differentially shifting the dominant narratives for young women and men on the continent. The Issue offers insights into who is and how they are constructing the dominant stories, and with what effects. Some articles highlight how these are in turn challenged and deconstructed and new meanings negotiated. Other pieces unpack the politics of the various sites where narratives are contested, including through the arts, media, academia, and the resultant contested ideologies on culture, religion, politics, economics among others. Some articles also highlight the various movements and groupings that seek creative solutions to Africa’s current and envisaged youth challenges.

The place of young people in socio-political and economic processes has historically been contested in Africa. Stereotypically, youth have tended to be portrayed as angry, restless, victims, vulnerable, venerable, impressionable, troubled, and sometimes violent. Institutions such as the media are seen as playing a significant role in the shaping and construction of such narratives. That seems to be changing though, of late, with youth themselves constructing new and multiple other narratives fanned by many factors. For instance, social media and other creative spaces are perceived by many as having opened up opportunities for youth to not only challenge these dominant narratives but to also create counter-narratives that paint a different picture about their lives and their role in global and local politics. Although this is not new, what is new – which is the motivation for this Issue of *BUWA* – is how there seems to be renewed interest globally and locally to “engage youth” resulting in some observable shifts in policy and practice.

It is essential to highlight upfront that the concepts of ‘youth’ and ‘narrative’ are not neutral, especially when considered in the context of policy, activism and social justice discourses. There is, therefore, need to problematize them. In this issue, we adopt the African Union definition, which categorizes those between ages 15 and 35 years as a youth. The UN limits its meaning to those between 15-24 years old,
while the African Youth Charter stretches it to those up to 35 years. It is also common that some states on the continent do stretch this to 40, for various reasons and conveniences.

Similarly, in the body of literature on policy, advocacy, and social justice, ‘narratives’ tend to be used interchangeably with ‘stories’ and this is acceptable to a certain extent. We have adopted the more expansive definition offered by Brett Davidson (2015) citing Jones and McBeth (2010); Frank (2010) and Fisher (1984) which goes further to understand a narrative as:

“...a collection or body stories of characters, joined in some common problem as fixers (heroes), causes (villains) or the harmed (victims) in a temporal trajectory (plot) leading towards resolution within a particular setting or context (Jones & McBeth 2010; Frank 2010)”. These stories together or collectively convey a common worldview or meaning – an interpretation of the world and how it works (Frank 2010; Fisher 1984).”

This explains how in any given context there will emerge narratives that become more dominant than others, and there will inevitably also arise other stories that are constructed to counter that dominance; to capture specific audiences, sympathies, empathies and solidarity and action. Sisonke Msimang supports this view in a 13 January 2017 TED Talk in which she flagged potential limitations of storytelling in activism for social justice. Msimang advances the argument that in and of themselves, “stories are not as magical as they seem”; and that it is the link they have to specific broader issues and how they compel audiences to act and do something about those concerns that matters.

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In tracking developments in youth discourses and narratives on the continent and globally, there are discernible patterns of dominant and counter-narratives on their realities and engagement in the socio-economic and political arenas. On the one hand, there is an observable pattern of a global drive towards an agenda for ‘engaging youth’ and ‘bringing them into the mainstream of these arenas. A narrative of patriotism and nationalism apparently informs this opinion. For instance, at the global level, the UN in 2013 – for the first time in its history – appointed a Special Envoy on Youth (Ahmad Alhendawi).

At a continental level, African leaders seem to have also woken up to the fact that Africa is home to the majority of young people globally, with 200 million people aged between 15 and 24. It therefore comes as no surprise that the AU has declared 2017 the ‘AU year of harnessing the youth demographic dividend.’ This apparent desire by policy actors to ‘engage youth’ is often viewed by youth as not necessarily driven by the need to allow them to define their polity and shape the rules of the game, but rather to co-opt them and get them to behave, be cultured and maintain the traditions set for them by others.

On the other hand, there is a school of thought that advances that youth themselves have moved ahead to retell their stories, thus generating new narratives of the role and place they occupy as national and global citizens. The reason given for this shift is a perception of youth’s disillusionment with failed neo-liberal economic policies, increasing poverty, unemployment and other challenges that increasingly disproportionately affect them. Young people seem to be well ahead of their game; dictating to the world their role and how they want to contribute to development processes. The proliferation of youth-focused and ‘owned’ spaces and communities of practice, movements and solidarity initiatives that youth have carved for themselves globally – which in some places have significantly influenced the social, economic and political agendas in some countries – is evidence of this.

Young people in this generation are creating and appropriating new languages, new symbols, new styles and creating new meanings and expression, both online and offline – albeit, with differential experiences. Factors such as geographical location, educational background and access to tools such as information and communication technologies to mention just a few enables different lived realities among youths. Proponents of this narrative argue that the new reality is ‘disruption and non-conformity’ (in this case driven by the youth) as the new norm. The argument is that protests and related forms of engagement have shaped what some have labelled ‘a revolution.
without an ideology or a project’ where the protesting in itself often seems the end goal of the protest action. The pattern is of a revolution of youth who appear to distrust the state, distrust elites, distrust mainstream media, distrust adults, distrust markets and reject formal established institutions and organizations, and resist any idea of a dominant leader.”

Social media, information and communication tools and the reconstruction of the arts and culture are often viewed as the vehicles through which this disruption is being created, contested, and played out. However, not all youth are finding voice and space in this manner. There are also arguments that the youth movement, in general, has tended to be elitist, and is appropriated by the youth of better economic and educational social standing, those in urban areas compared to those in rural and peri-urban settings, to note a few differentials.

Grace Chirenje aptly illustrates how youth in Africa have journeyed through many stages of definition, from being regarded as mere children and spectators to their development, to them occupying centre stage in contemporary development discourse as a result of the demographic dividend factor. It is therefore not surprising that the definition of ‘youth’ on the continent tends to be fluid to suit certain agendas. Alcides André de Amaral makes this point even more poignant in his argument that “youth is a lie!” He critiques the apparent tendency to approach youth as a ‘homogenous herd’ that needs to be “grazed and fed” by the ‘elders,’ before they can be trusted to participate in social and political processes efficiently.

There is need to unpack the power dynamics among this ‘youth herd’ as it were, and a feminist lens allows for such. However, even where a feminist lens is applied to de-homogenize the ‘herd,’ there is still need to appreciate the nuances of differential young women’s groups and realities. Consequently, while Rekopantswe Mate firmly places young women’s counter-narratives in the picture – especially in issues of health, sex and sexuality – she also cautions against the dangers of underplaying the inevitable controversies and contradictions that characterize these counter-narratives. She argues that some of these narratives do not necessarily challenge nor change gender relations.

Lauren Tracy-Temba provides an analysis of how regional and continental policy and legal frameworks have failed to create comfortable seats for young women in politics and decision-making, arguing that this has limited the power that young women’s narratives have had to influence global processes. Three cases from Angola (Florita Cuhanga Telo); Botswana (Resego Natalie Kgoditsile) and Zambia (Namakando Simamuna) illustrate how youth are making an effort to change this reality at national levels. The often missing piece, however, is the nuanced gendered dimensions of these truths.

Telo demonstrates how in Angola it took a separate Facebook page created by young feminists in the country to make visible the two young women who were part of the famous ‘15+2’ activists who made international headlines for mobilizing youth voices for political participation in the country. Similarly, Kgoditsile’s article demonstrates how university and student activism have become sites of mobilizing young people to challenge those in power to account for their actions or lack of them in Botswana. Simamuna shares the case of youth self-organizing under the banner of the ‘Triple V’ campaign in Zambia’s 2016 elections, which became a game changer and influenced the voter patterns in a country that had had concerning levels of voter apathy.

The academia is worth exploring in this inquiry, especially given that it is an important site shaping thoughts and ideologies. Literature abounds on the limitations that
education systems in the region have in creating scope for progressive thinking and action, and how they have short-changed especially girls and women (see our previous issue BUWA#7). Lieketo “Dee” Mohoto shares how this manifests in the discomfort and sheer absence of young Black women in tertiary institutions as lecturers, professors, and associate professors in South Africa. She argues that it is not enough to employ young Black women into an academic system that has not significantly shifted regarding creating an environment that supports active mentorship.

Another vigorously contested site given prominence in this Issue is the economy. There has been a growing narrative pushing for youth entrepreneurship as a panacea for their economic participation. The failure of most formal economies and rising unemployment among young people in Africa has fanned this perspective. Given the declining formal economic and business environment, entrepreneurship has been touted as ‘a viable route to success for young people.’ In pursuit of this, there have been Global Entrepreneurship Summits hosted in the past decade, one notably on the African continent. Taking into account, of course, the realities of a patriarchal continent whose economies are mostly enclave, and the informal sectors are invariably growing more prominent and are mostly unregulated and operate on a ‘survival of the fittest’ models, young women’s stories in such a context differ from those of young men.

The impetus for entrepreneurship appears to be solely due to many assumptions, including the proliferation of information and communication technology platforms that are seen to be enabling people to conduct business with relative ease. Based on this argument, some countries including Kenya, Zimbabwe, and others have developed E-Hubs predominantly for youth. Rudo Nyangulu writes about the innovation value-add of such Hubs in Zimbabwe, arguing that there is potential in these for creating opportunities for young women in the informal economic sectors. Sadly, there has been a limited interrogation, at all levels, of this theory of change for the economic advancement of mainly young women on the continent. In this economic sphere, there seems to be dissonance in how policies seem not to be tapping into the potential that one of Africa’s primary economic resource – land – could offer to its youth dividend, an argument advanced by Eugene Maiga. The advent of social media and ICTs have significantly changed the political and socio-economic realities of many youths on our continent. Sarah Chiambu shows how cyber-connectivity has enabled youth to reimagine their identity as global citizens; giving themselves a right and ability to participate in political and other processes thousands of kilometres beyond their national borders. Chao Mbogo highlights that the terrain of access to education and skills to use ICTs and science and technology is, however, not balanced for young men and young women on the continent, as her life story and experiences in science and technologies typify. Rachel Chavula-Sibande and Martha Chilongoshi share a real example of how they have had to deliberately ensure gender-responsive access, through establishing a Girls’ Coding Club Initiative, to balance the scales in the youth technology Hubs they have created in Malawi and Zambia.

There has been an escalation of religious fundamentalisms on the continent, which have significantly influenced how others view youth, and how they see themselves. Nyaradzo Mashayamombe contends that in countries such as Zimbabwe, where politicians have closed the space for youth participation and where politicians have manipulated and abused their power to milk citizens of their wealth, “those not in political thuggery turn to religion” to harm young people. She further argues that there is widespread manipulation of young women in religious institutions. Tsitsi Fungurani shows differences in how these realities of young women in rural and urban spaces tend to construct different narratives of their respective existences; with rural youth comparatively at a disadvantage.

Beyond the concepts and the sites of youth narratives construction, one of the critical questions we also explore in this Issue is an understanding of the vehicles and channels that are enabling and/or blocking these processes. There is a definite pattern of closure of most formal channels of voice and participation (e.g., in mainstream media, in parliaments, in family structures among others) for youth in most countries on the continent. Anthea Garman, Vanessa Malila and Thandi Bombi collectively argue that young women’s voices are notably absent in mainstream media, and poor listening skills on the part of journalists are to blame for this status quo.
Youth consider themselves as leaders of today who are already involved.

In such contexts where formal channels of voice and communication seem to be closing more than opening, the arts and cultural expressions have resurfaced as potent channels for youth across the continent. Youth ‘activism’ for social justice seems to be getting entrenched by the day, and many articles in this volume explore the various art forms that seem to be picking momentum on the continent. If the increase in scholarly inquiry into this is anything to go by, then this is evidence of the resurgence of interest in the arts for social justice activism. Richard Benza explores and affirms the centrality of storytelling in activism for social justice, with a special focus on digital story-telling. Sisonke Msimang however, highlights the potential contractions and ironies that may result from ‘stanning’ our favorite story tellers.

Vida de Voss Links offers a case study of how Sister Namibia magazines have provided space for young women to share their stories in the country. Fungayi Percy Makombe makes a case for why theatre, which has always been (and continues to be) a vehicle for political subversion, has since increased in potency in increasingly hostile and oppressive political environments. Lovemore Chidemo and Agness Chindimba further advance that special interest groups such as youth with disability are equally appropriating this vehicle to give an alternative story to the narrative of disability on the continent. Visual arts such as film and photography have similarly been reinvigorated in the quest for alternative ways of picturing youth realities on the continent, as Damaris Irungu Ochieng and Aisha Mugo both show. Tanatsei Gambura and Nyaradzo Mashayamombe seal this section with poems that aptly capture the tensions between the dominant and counter-narratives of growing up as young African women on the continent.

This Volume further unpacks issues that seem to dominate and take priority in youth narratives: from education, employment, power, leadership, sex and sexuality, and inequality among others. While some have regarded young people as ‘the leaders of tomorrow,’ needing to be groomed to ‘become leaders,’ youth, on the other hand, consider themselves as leaders of today who are already involved. Those that have bought into the latter narrative have already begun investing in youth leadership programmes, and Neetha Tangirala shares the design and impacts of one such model – the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI).

While most leadership development models have been designed to respond to the leadership crisis that characterises the continent, young people’s concerns with poverty, inequality, and disempowerment have been the rally points. Lerato Mohlamenyane debunks the myth of young South African women getting pregnant as a means to access social grants; arguing that the issue is, in fact, the need to address the structural inequality that makes young women more vulnerable to the risk of early and unwanted pregnancies.

The volume concludes with an exploration of some of the strategies that youth are employing in their quest to construct what they are labelling counter-narratives to the dominant ones. One such approach that seems to have taken root across the continent is what Nathan Mukoma calls ‘disruption and non-conformity’ in an analysis that unpacks how youth are carving space for themselves in both private and public spheres. However, Grace Chirenje shares that the ‘disruption and non-conformity’ have not happened uninformed, in some parts of the continent. She makes a case for deliberate and targeted strategies to support youth in their own self-organising and self-mobilisation efforts, to ensure sustainable contestation and counter-narratives that allow for more robust engagement in exploring alternative strategies to meet the continent’s needs.

Readers are challenged to critically engage with the realities of power and the powerlessness of young women within youth-tailored spaces, power and the powerlessness of youth in progressive social justice movements and networks, power and powerlessness of youth in public policy-making and legal frameworks, as well as in the private space of the home. I hope this Issue challenges readers to ask the critical questions that ought to be asked if Africa is indeed to ‘harness the demographic dividend’ as envisaged.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alice D Kanengoni is the Editor of BUWA! She also manages the Women’s Rights Programme at OSISA. Write to her with feedback and theme suggestions on alice@osisa.org
I recall the words so vividly: “You are a mafiko-zolo – the just arrived”! What did I know about women’s human rights? What did I know about human rights broadly? Who did I think I was to come into an already defined space and attempt a transformation of how things were done? Young “girls” were supposed to know their place and let adults make the decisions. I was just a “youth” after all.

The more I played around with the words that had been hurled at me, the more I got angry and resolute to ensuring that young women created a space to know themselves better and make a difference; the more I also wanted an urgent transformation of the status quo. In a bid to unpack my struggle, internal conflict and situation, I thought it best to have a conversation with my mother. I shared with her my situation and the words I had been told. My mother told me that it is the way things are – “children ought to obey their parents”, after all that is what the Bible said. What she told me is that things are the way they should be. I realised then that unless I worked with other like-minded young people, we were doomed to relegating our destiny to adults who seemed unaware and unconscious of the existence of an alternative world – of creating that reality, then making it happen. My story is not unique – it resonates with very many young people today. They need to be knowledgeable, to be heard, to amplify voices and to make a difference as growing souls. However, most of this will remain a mirage if African leaders, the young people themselves, and other players take no practical steps in bringing youth to the centre of the development agenda.

In this 21st century, young people have been transitioning, both in the definition of the term youth and their fitting into the development agenda. There has been a clear trajectory that can be traced in placing youth on the development agenda and ensuring that they become key players in the contemporary development discourse in Africa, and not just spectators. The recent acknowledgment by the African Union (AU) in dedicating 2017 as a year of “Harnessing Demographic Dividend through Investment in the Youth” enhances the youth agenda across the development sector in African countries. In the next few pages, I will seek to explore what all these notions mean, and how they relate to the youth as a critical mass in Africa’s contemporary development discourse. It is critical to develop comprehensive programmes that facilitate the enhancement of the youth’s capacities and facilitate cohesion to ensure their meaningful participation in transforming the development realities of Africa.

Defining youth in the African context

A cursory look across Africa will reveal that youth in the African traditional culture are broadly and traditionally regarded as “children”. Perhaps the most outstanding unpacking of the concept of youth is one closely linked to understanding the definition of the concept of children in Africa. Ncube (1998) argues that the notion of understanding traditional concepts of childhood is different from that of the developed world. He goes on to explain that in Africa, it is not age that is of paramount importance, but “inter-generational obligations of support and reciprocity”.

The UNDP (2006: 12) supports Ncube’s argument, noting that youth is a social construct and is less about age than it is about status and behavior. A “child” (of whatever age) in the African tradition has certain expectations attached to them by their parents. As long as a young person is still of a certain social status and behaves in a certain way, they are deemed as youth and are under the care and protection of some guardian or parent – they
are expected to follow what their guardian considers ideal. This means that young people in African traditional society have essentially no rights outside those of children. This puts young people in a somewhat precarious position, as they face tremendous pressure to prove that they are no longer children but can fend and care for themselves. However, policy-related documents have shifted the definition of youth in Africa.

The definition of youth can be understood broadly to mean young people, although the age bracket may differ from context to context. The African Charter (2006: 11) explains that “youth shall refer to any person aged between fifteen to thirty five years”. The UN defines youth as “those persons between the age of fifteen and twenty-four years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.” Furlong (2012: 300) defines youth as a “social construct, detached from biological criteria”. He goes on to agree to the aforementioned point that “youth is constructed differently across time and space”.

As a social construct, youth defines a time of transition and confusion. Young people are trying to get a grasp of their identity and are journeying into adulthood. For many, it is a time to discover who they are and who they want to be. It is a critical time to grow and define their worldview. As described by UNDP (2006: 12), the youth phase of life is when an individual needs “protection, sheltering, and guidance to self-determination, maturity, independence, responsibility and accountability for decision making.” This is never easy, especially when coupled with low economic status and lack of freedom. Youth is a time to learn, unlearn and relearn, and relationship issues become central to the youth. Youth are susceptible to many forms of abuse as they seek to chart their future course with very little experience. However, youth are also a force to reckon with. Young people are expected to be trained and acquire skills that will contribute to their economies (Ball et al 2000). This provides an opportunity for young people to thrive, explore, and contribute to Africa’s development.

The gendered dimension of youth

The UNDP (2006) recognises that the meaning of “youth” varies across societies, and has a gendered dimension, with girls and boys experiencing being young differently. In defining the youth, Ellis (1999) argues that there should be a clear gendered definition that shows that the world contracts for girls but expands for boys, who are often regarded as men more than girls are regarded as women during the same transitional periods. Africa has many rituals and ceremonies that are rites of passage, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, and these differ for boys and girls. It is sufficient to note that girls are often relegated to the domestic sphere whilst boys are left to chart their own course. Girls often lack safe spaces to collectively co-create alternatives for their participation and advancement. This has resulted in fewer women than men making it in leadership or participating in spaces where developmental decisions are made. When looking at the possibilities of harnessing the youth as a critical partner to development, stakeholders need to be aware of the reality that patriarchy continues to affect youth development and participation. Issues around gender equality and equity should be central as players go about their work with the youth.

The youth: a mere nuisance or change agents?

In Africa, the youth have been at the centre of resistant movements and transformation. In South Africa, the youth were very active in dismantling apartheid and today we see them challenging the status quo. Zimbabwe’s war against the Ian Smith regime was won with the active support of the youth of yesteryear and today in Zimbabwe the most restless people
challenging President Mugabe are once again the youth. Uganda after the overthrow of Idi Amin saw a youth take over; President Museveni was then a youth and today he faces the wrath of the youth as they seek a better narrative for the Pearl of Africa.

Recalling the various resistant movements and why the young decided to get involved in the liberation struggles of the day, Nieftagodien (2011) explains that “the movement gave hope to a generation of black youth that they could change society by liberating themselves. Emancipation for them [the youth] was all-encompassing: economic, social, political and cultural. They were audacious and had a vision for freedom”. The same aspirations are true for the youth today.

Youth at the centre of resistance movements in Africa

Waithood

In unpacking the notion of waithood, Honwana (2013) explains that this is a “prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood”. This period is filled with a lot of uncertainties, and young people have to improvise, especially around economic realities and personal relations. This puts young people in a precarious position as they grapple with bad governance, corruption, state capture, loneliness, poor gender response of social services, and conflicted notions of identity. Young people are desperate for something better than what the status quo across Africa seems to provide.

North Africa

The Maghreb region in Northwest Africa includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania (Burckhardt 1997: 7). This region considers itself more Arabic than African because of their history. Islam is widely practiced, with some instances of religious fundamentalism. The Maghreb is associated with the Arab Spring that took place between December 2010 and December 2012. The Arab Spring was a result of authoritarianism and a deep desire of the youth for a brighter future (Davies 2014: 307). Other causes of the Arab Springs include kleptocracy, human rights violations, unemployment, political corruption, and structural demographic factors that include the failure to harness the youth bulge.

The Arab Spring resulted in many transformations. In Morocco, constitutional reforms were implemented as a result of the protests. In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, governments were overthrown. Young people used creative ways of mobilising and organising, such as protest camps, civil resistance, social media, and sit-ins. The youth were tired of their current reality and took matters into their own hands. The governments of the day failed to harness the youth’s energy so as to develop an alternative that would result in a win-win situation. This shows the need for dialogue if the youth are going to have their realities transformed. The Maghreb region remains generally unstable.

Hassler (2011) examines the role of religion in the Arab Spring. He explains that individual faith and religion cannot be overlooked in the protests. The interpretation of the Quran and use of Mosques as sites of the struggle for “democracy” is key in this analysis. What is critical to note is that religion is central in Africa when talking about youth. Religion is sometimes used as a way of blinding young people, encouraging complacency by promising a joyful future in a paradise to come, and young people are duped by religious leaders into giving up their hard-earned income in a bid to “seed” a brighter future. Religion plays a major role in Africa, and it is important to explore ways of using religious spaces strategically to further the youth’s political consciousness (as in the Arab Spring).

West Africa

An interesting case study in West Africa would be the Gambia, where Yahya Jammeh involuntarily left the throne after a twenty-two year rule. The youth of Gambia worked on a campaign, #GambiaHasDecided, mobilising, organising themselves, and supporting the formation of a progressive coalition that eventually ousted Jammeh. The youth were frustrated and tired of the status quo, and a frustrated youth is a recipe for disaster. Governments can indeed be toppled.

In Nigeria, the young people continue to actively challenge the centres of power and demand transformation. Boko Haram continues to threaten Nigerian youth participation, as unemployment, weak family...
structures, illiteracy, and poverty make young people vulnerable to radicalisation (Onuoha 2012). Young women are used as prisoners of war by the fundamentalist groupings, with the girls of Chibok being at the centre of recent narratives. Again we see the vulnerability of youth during the period of waithood.

**East Africa**

East Africa has been regarded as a militarised region, with many leaders who came to power in a coup of some sort. In Uganda (considered the most stable and peaceful country in East Africa), young people form seventy-seven percent of the population. They live in dire poverty, defined by high levels of corruption (Furlong, ibid), and are increasingly restless. Governments need to explore ways to engage and work with the youth to avoid instability in the region.

In Kenya, al-Shabab continues to wreak havoc on the country’s peace and security with terrorist attacks on Westgate Mall in 2013 and the Garissa University in 2015. Again, religious fundamentalism is threatening the lives of the youth, and in Kenya a new type of Pentecostalism threatens young women’s bodily integrity as they police what women should wear and insist on the marriage of young women.

**Southern Africa**

This region has been regarded as the most stable on the African continent, with most civil unrest in most countries having ended after the fight for independence. Zimbabwe has seen a fair share of youth unrest in resistance to the three-decade rule of President Mugabe. Young women and men have taken centre stage in the struggle for emancipation.

The University of Zambia has been known as a centre for struggle and resistance, but the government has now put in place stringent measures for those caught participating in protests. Mozambique has a fair share of youth who have come together to protest the status quo, with some joining forces with Dhlakama. In South Africa, the leadership of Julius Malema has ushered in the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), who use unconventional methods to challenge power and the status quo.

These regional examples show how the youth are taking their place to define what they want to see in their countries. The concept of waithood has a direct link to the youth’s restlessness. Most of these interventions are unplanned and could have dire outcomes, because there are sometimes no planned alternatives to the status quo.

**The youth as a demographic dividend**

**What is the youth bulge?**

“A youth bulge is a common phenomenon in many developing countries” (Lin 2012), and this notion is especially linked to the least developed countries. It is a result of a country successfully reducing infant mortality, while still having high fertility rates. This results in a high proportion of young adults and children in the population.

The youth bulge has often been associated with restless youth. Hendrixson (2003) explains that the notion of a youth bulge is a situation where twenty percent of the population is defined as youth. Where the population also has high percentages of men, the threat of violence is high.

**What is the youth dividend?**

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA 2016) defines a demographic dividend as “the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population age structure...”. This has to do with the age of those who are involved in productive work being higher than those of the non-working age in a population. Williams (2012) explains that a demographic dividend
has to do with a workforce that creates an opportunity for more investments in education and health care, and increases outputs for investments and economic growth. A demographic dividend has to with a population having its youthful population engaged in productive work, and less resources are allocated to caring for a younger population. This results in economic growth. Lin (2012) adds that:

In a country with a youth bulge, as the young adults enter the working age, the country’s dependency ratio will decline. If the increase in the number of working age individuals can be fully employed in productive activities, other things being equal, the level of income per capita should increase as a result. The youth bulge will become a demographic dividend.

In order for youth in Africa to actually become an economic dividend, there are many conditions that need to be in hold place. Audiopedia (undated) identifies four critical aspects that facilitate the translation of a demographic dividend into economic development. Firstly, there should be an increased labor supply and an economy able to employ workers. Secondly, there needs to be an increase in savings due to decreased dependence, resulting in capital development and higher productivity. Thirdly, human capital has to be able to cope with economic pressures and enhance better education for their families. And fourthly, there must be increased domestic demand due to increased Gross Domestic Produce (GDP).

The question for Africa is whether these four conditions can be met so as to effectively harness the youth as an economic dividend.

Harnessing the youth as a demographic dividend

On 30 January 2017, the AU met under the theme “Harnessing Demographic Dividend through Investment in the Youth”. This was in line with a decision taken by the same meeting in January 2016 to facilitate the harnessing of youth in Africa as central to the development discourse (AU 2016: i). This decision gives a sense of commitment by leaders in Africa to stop treating the youth as “children” at the development table. However, actions speak louder than words.

Despite the progress that has been made in ensuring that glossy-paged documents with progressive thoughts are produced, much still needs to be done to translate those progressive thoughts, decisions and roadmaps into reality. The lived realities of the youth in Africa show a totally different picture. There is so much more that is missing for the youth.

The leaders in Africa are mostly old men who frame their leadership in strongly patriarchal terms. They still believe that youth are children and, whatever the AU decides, their attitudes and behaviors remain the same. These are men (and occasionally women) who are committed to holding onto power, and they very rarely care to think what the youth actually want. After all, these are their children, nieces, and nephews – mere “youngsters”. Power is what is at the top of their agenda.

A true harnessing of the youth as a demographic dividend, facilitating economic development in Africa, means treating young people as equals (which in fact they are). The narrative of youth has shifted, and the youth are now regarded as critical players in the contemporary development discourse.

Much has been said about the youth bulge and the demographic dividend. The main issue now is exploring how to make the AU decision count for the youth. The four main themes preferred in the roadmap will be used as a way of framing the way forward. I recommend the following:

1. A transformation of mindsets by leaders so they see the youth as equal players in the development discourse. There can be shared multi-generational learning. Active listening could be of critical importance for both the leaders and the youth.
2. Comprehensive sexuality education – governments should facilitate awareness-raising around young people’s sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), because this directly affects the youth bulge. More than that, understanding their SRHR will enable the youth to make decisions about their future and not contract diseases that will be detrimental to their role in economic development.
3. Education and skills development – governments should ensure that the education that is being offered in schools is in line with global demands for labor. Educational systems currently seem to produce employees instead of entrepreneurs.
4. Entrepreneurship and employment – closely linked to the above recommendation is ensuring that youth (as key partners to the contemporary development discourse) have access to financial resources to fund entrepreneurial enhancement and development. This should take into account the fact that the youth may not have the necessary experience, track records, or even understanding of becoming “borrowers”. Stringent methods of repayment need to be developed to foster a culture of accountability and transparency.
5. Rights, governance and empowerment – governments should promote a non-partisan and objective awareness of rights for young people, coupled with good democratic governance and ensuring that the youth are at the centre of their own empowerment. Literature should be packaged in a youth-friendly way and be disseminated using the mediums of communication preferred by the youth.
Governments across Africa have made much progress in ensuring that they harness the youth as a demographic dividend. A clear example is in the ratification and domestication of the Youth Charter by African countries, and now the adaptation of the roadmap of “Harnessing Demographic Dividend through Investment in the Youth”. The progress in Africa is commendable, but more needs to be done to see the narrative of African youth transformed.

**Conclusion**

The youth in Africa have journeyed through many stages of definition, from being regarded as mere children and spectators to their own development, to them occupying the centre stage in contemporary development discourse as a result of the demographic dividend factor. However, more needs to be done to translate the demographic dividend into something meaningful for young people in Africa. The AU declaration of 2017 as the year for “Harnessing Demographic Dividend through Investment in the Youth” offers a major opportunity for young people to come together with their leaders and assert their role as critical contributors to the contemporary development discourse.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje is a feminist known for her magnanimous African energy and strong dedication to her work. She is the youth advisor at Action Aid International Uganda. Her background is humanities. She holds an Honors degree in African languages and culture, a Masters degree in leadership and management, and a PhD in gender, feminism and sexualities (with a minor in leadership). Grace’s passion is working with young people and facilitating for their highest level of human potential development. She is a writer, mother, wife, sister, talk-show host and lives a full life. Grace loves reading, body combat, aerobics, swimming and communing with nature.

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“Youth is just a word” said the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, raising a polemic and, consequently, a heated discussion in academic and intellectual circles around the idea of youth. In fact, “youth” is a term embracing everything, and that enables its easy appropriation. Young people are seen as a layer of individuals of a certain fertile age. But if on one hand they are seen as rebels, criminals and drug addicts, on the other they are associated with the age of both consumption and pleasure. They are seen as those who disrespect their elders when they are marginal, or those who follow, learn and draw on them when well behaved. However, as I will try to reflect in this article, things are not as simple as that.

The reality of young people in Africa calls for more studies in order to understand the complex reality. This complexity is probably due to the fact that “the youth phenomenon” can encompass everything, like politics, economy or culture. This article focuses on the political side of the phenomenon. A reflection about the youth in Africa is an invitation that Africa itself makes to each of us, based on the history of the continent itself. Common sense does not allow us to deny that many young men and women were “favorable raw material” for the slave trade and for the independence struggles of our continent, that many young people decided to join the struggle to free our people from colonial slavery and oppression.

We could see “youth” as the part of society that sacrifices itself for the good of the “Nation” or of the “Motherland”. The famous expression directed to young people by African leaders (both living and dead), “The future of the Nation is in your hands”, finds its foundation there. Again things are not so simple. The idea of “youth”, both in Africa and elsewhere, is ambivalent, confusing, and a point of much discussion. Asked about the meaning of youth, we come up with many words. If we assume that it was the youth who liberated the continent, we are forced to ask which youth we refer to. Some were called “reactionary” and “armed bandits”, and some were called “comrades” and “compatriots”. Some were on the colonial side, while others joined the liberation front. On the other hand, if we assume that “Young people are the sap of the nation”, we are soon challenged by questions such as “Which young people?” The ones who belong to the cells of the parties or those who protest against them? The ones that can (as we have heard a lot in Mozambique) “sell the nation”, or those who humbly follow the example of their elders? Are they those who have a commitment to the nation and to the motherland, or those who are against the current idea of “nation” and “motherland”? What determines youth? Is it age or the identification with the cause of a certain party?

There are several issues that make the “youth phenomenon” controversial. In this article I argue that, in Africa, youth is often nothing more than a lie. This lie is based on the appropriation of history by the elders. An idea of youth is invented, it becomes official, and the young people appear as the reflection of the elders. That’s why the young people cannot forget the history of the continent as told to them, and they cannot disrespect the homeland and the nation as defined by the elders. This definition must be rejected. It is an erroneous image, because it is invented. It is important to question the notions of youth as a homogeneous group, as a political instrument and as government recipients. I argue that none of these notions is true. Every lie about “youth” limits the true participation of young people.

1 For this purpose I have based this article on an analysis of published documents of the youth organisations and those that deal with the problem of young people.
Youth and political participation

From the number of reports and programmes about political participation in Africa we can infer that it is seen as a problem, and the young people (both men and women) are seen as the focus. It is in this sense that the Mozambican Youth Parliament (the Parlamento Juvenil or PJ in Portuguese) commits itself to “actively engage in the civic education process”, and the developers of the Youth Charter urge leaders that they “must ensure the participation of young people in Parliament”. But do they participate in decision-making or do they circumscribe themselves only in the peripheries of power, waiting for an opportunity to attract the goodwill of the elders?

The problem of the political participation of citizens in general, and of young people in particular, is a false problem in the sense that we first need to determine what this participation consists of. According to the 2007 Poverty Observatory in Mozambique, citizens in Mozambique do not necessarily exercise power, but delegate it to political parties and organs of the state (Francisco and Matter 2017, p. 17). Then who controls those parties and organs of the state? It is the elders. The young people, this politically underprivileged group, has to join the parties always fighting in the margins of power or organise themselves in associations because, in the elders’ judgment, they are not yet politically qualified to take power and to exercise it directly. Is this really participation? I don’t believe so! Based on Arnstein’s typology of participation (Norad 2013, p. 10; Francisco and Matter 2007, p. 14), it is “non-participation” or, at most, a false participation manipulated by some in order to repress true participation (Francisco and Matter 2007, p. 14).

The participation of young people lies not in the possibility of organising themselves in associations or organisations in order to have a voice, but in their capacity to decide and act freely for themselves and take their own initiative independently of outside institutions (Norad 2013, p. 11) such as the African Union Commission, PJ, the Mozambican Youth Organisation, or the FRELIMO youth arm (OJM). It is not up to these organisations, embedded in the margins of power, to mobilise young people to participate in political life. The young people are self-propelled. They must themselves organise in a party and compete head-to-head for power. This is the true participation that is avoided by young people consumed by the different lies about them.

Youth as a herd or homogeneous group

Reading carefully the documents of youth associations such as those of the PJ, the African Youth Charter, or the OJM statutes, we can easily find “youth” as an identified group. They are reflected as a unique group which faces “these-problems”, problems that need “these-solutions”. They are a group that think in this way and not any other. They are either the “sap of a nation”, or they are sellouts. They are drug addicts, drunkards, criminals when they are marginal, but “true youth” when they are members of the ruling party, of the Youth League, PJ or of the African Union. They need to be represented, driven and oriented. They need a shepherd. They are no more than a herd. The Youth Parliament, for example, says that it speaks on behalf of young people, but then calls for greater inclusion of young people, and even calls “all political parties to have at least 60 percent of young people in the decision-making bodies”. Why didn’t young people set up their own parties with a different agenda? Setting up a party is the prerogative of our elders. For young people, a future shaped by the elders is what awaits them. The 2063 Agenda (2015, p. 3), for example, signed

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2 In Portuguese Organização da Juventude Moçambicana.
3 Youth Electoral Manifesto
Young people, men and women, are individuals who have dreams and longings. They are individuals who seek their own happiness. They are not waiting for a helping hand from the government, a charitable soul, or an act of goodwill that puts them in operation. They are in a constant struggle, day and night, men and women, searching for an opportunity to thrive.

by African leaders, proposes to solve the problems of youth because they believe that “[everyone] is confident that the future of Africa is in their hands”. Where does this homogenisation of “youth” come from? It is from such the documents of organisations led and guided by the elders such as “African Union” members with their Agenda 2063. The young people just have to adjust to them.

Thus, the youth becomes a group or herd, a homogeneous group that is easily identifiable. This flock needs to be represented by a shepherd who knows the problems of his sheep, what paths they should follow, what they should do, and how should they do it. If there is any deviation from this homogeneity, this young man or woman is marginal or rebellious. But if it is the youth a nation’s sap then this herd is the sap from the view of the elders. Youth is thus a product of the vision of today’s rulers, the young people of yesterday. The natural course of evolution of the African continent and African society is in their hands — these liberators. They, not the new generation, know what the society wants. They are the ones who founded the state and the ones who fought. They are the ones who set the people free and who know what is right and wrong in the evolution of our continent. And the young people, this unique group called youth, can only have something to say and do after the death of the old people. But about the children who will be the young people of tomorrow?

Youth as a political instrument

I have identified the homogenisation of youth as a falsification, a lie. The elders have a lot to gain from this lie. It makes it easy to manipulate others for their own advantage, and to make them a mere instrument for harvesting political dividends once they are found in the bulk of the pyramid. But to consolidate it, they must make them as vulnerable and needy as possible, so that they are not yet ready to take the lead. That’s the reason why Agenda 2063 defines young people as vulnerable, together with children and women. Then they need to be empowered by their elders. Why? Because the elders are already qualified enough, and it is only after 2063 that they will start thinking about putting young people at the center of decision-making.

There is never so much reference to young people as during electoral campaigns: employment for young people, housing for young people, vocational technical education for young people, universities for young people, etc. Alongside them are women and children. If the women and children were the vulnerable group, today (and as if there were an absolute distinction between being “young” and being “a woman”), there is now a need to bring the “young people” into the group. These youth are not only vulnerable but also needy, deprived, a group that lives in a “waithood” stage (Honwana, 2017). This fattens up electoral manifestoes, beautifies political speeches and makes the young people a political instrument. Strangely, the charter of youth organisations, the Youth Parliament’s Electoral Manifesto, is in line with the African Youth Charter which, in turn fits the desires of African leaders, wrapped in suits at the African Union. If it is true that youth is a rebel par excellence, on the African continent some of them are (par excellence) a group with an incredible capacity to adjust to the longings of the elders.

Youth as a recipient of government goodwill

It is not enough to look at youth as a political instrument, but also to see them as recipients of “goodwill” from governments. This is the noble lie! A Centre for Research does not hesitate, through the misery of young people, to ensure its reproduction by emphasising this image. Young people appear as herds which need grazing, but for this they need to organise themselves into associations “in order to better become recipients of government efforts”. It notes, without much effort, a clear politicisation and domestication of young people. These are nothing more than animate objects.

The idea of the centre (also shared by the AU and probably by the PJ) seems simple: young people are a needy group that, undoubtedly, needs the efforts of the elders to at least ensure their survival. It is not surprising that the title of the text published by the centre is “Resolving the concerns of young people”. Resolving by whom? It is by the government, the one that is totally controlled by the elders. The government needs to hear what are the problems of young people, to sit in a Council of Ministers and, finally, to resolve them. But to better resolve such problems the sheep need to be in one place so that the efforts of the shepherds can be successful. The young, these sheep today, are nothing more than government vassals or, strictly speaking, mere objects, like sacks, jars, cups or bottles. It is incumbent upon the government to fill or empty them.

4 “Police brief” of the Center of Research on Governance and Development (CPGD)
Final considerations

There is no better way to dominate, humiliate, exploit and oppress others than to make them believe that they are what we say they are. This is why young people in youth associations or organisations with a juvenile wing (such as the African Union) accept without reservation what is said about them. Young people are not a homogenous group that has these problems, with these solutions, that are in the hands of these individuals. They are not instruments of political propaganda, they are not gilded artifices that embellish speeches, they are not people in need and they are not recipients of a government that is said to have the function of solving the problems of its citizens. This is the image that the elders have, because they have built it themselves.

Young people, men and women, are individuals who have dreams and longings. They are individuals who seek their own happiness. They are not waiting for a helping hand from the government, a charitable soul, or an act of goodwill that puts them in operation. They are in a constant struggle, day and night, men and women, searching for an opportunity to thrive. They are finding tactics or strategies in pursuit of their own happiness. They are not just a word (“youth”) and they are not passive recipients (a flock) or instruments. They are individuals willing to act in search of their own self-determination. They are ready to take the power of governing themselves and others here and now – not in a future molded, invented and built by the elders. If I am correct, then perhaps Bourdieu is wrong about them. Maybe they are more than a word.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alcides André de Amaral was born in Quelimane in Mozambique. He studied at Eduardo Mondlane University and attained a degree in Sociology. He contributes to socio-political debates in Mozambique through his writings in public media. His areas of interest include power relations, gender, human rights and culture.

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This paper discusses young African women’s narratives (in language and social action) against dominant discourses from two perspectives. Firstly, through the prism of public health discourses vis-à-vis youth sexuality, it uses transactional sex practices and arguments by female youth which seem to counter public health logic. Secondly, it uses feminist discourses of empowerment vis-à-vis popular culture (broadly defined) as practiced and consumed by young women. The paper concludes that young women have countered dominant narratives in ways that undermine solidarity, possibly because of a neoliberal ethos that emphasises individualism. The paper argues that female youth counter-narratives are either invisible and little understood or pathologised as illicit, immoral or irresponsible (Groes-Green 2013, Nyamnjoh 2005, Longfield 2004). Young women resist in ways that are nuanced and contradictory.

Youth receive attention in academic and policy debates when there is rapid social change that scrambles transitions to adulthood, heightening anxiety about the future and morality (Buscholtz 2002, La Hause 1990). Traditionally, transitions entail rites of passage into adulthood. In today’s changing socio-economic context, transition rites have changed in rigour, duration, resources needed, and warranty of achieving ideal social adulthoods. These rites include schooling, vocational training or university education, wage work and founding independent households (in some cases preceded by marriage). Increasingly, more time is spent in education, and endemic unemployment means that (across Africa) many young people are forced to delay setting up independent households, encouraging deviance from dominant narratives.

Young people are often blamed for failure to transition successfully, but this overlooks the changes in social relations, resources and support systems needed for successful transitions (Cole and Durham 2007). Young people in Africa currently have to deal with the combined effects of globalisation, gerontocratic and patriarchal interests (Diouf 2003). For young women, prevailing gender dynamics of marginalisation and invisibility mean that their social action is often misconstrued because of hierarchical incongruities in which they are expected to be gatekeepers and custodians of local customs (Bay-Cheng 2003). When we refer to dominant discourses we have to understand how the three forces that Diouf refers to work together to create dominance.

What is meant by youth?

There are many ways of conceptualising youth (see Jones 2010). In this paper, youth is understood as relational, fluid for persons under study or being referred to, and thus variable with context (Bucholtz 2002). The relational definition is founded on power imbalances (Berliner 2005, Burke 2000). By emphasising relations between and among people, “youth” refers to those who are seen as junior, dependent, or clients of powerful, senior persons who are seen as patrons because of their influence. These power inequalities are pervasive, as seen in age and patriarchal relations between men and women (Groes-Green 2013, Nyamnjoh 2005). Patronage is common in kin, gender and ethnic relations, in hometown networks, and in conditions of growing inequality (Groes-Green 2013, Archambault 2013), which typify much of the region. There is a pervasive belief that women need money, and that men have it (Swidler and Watkins 2007:150). In this discussion, how young women leverage patronage is of interest.

Youth can also be seen in contrast to adulthood, and characterised by transience, lack of responsibilities (Blatterer 2010), which...
Young women are challenging and resisting the dominant cultural narratives.

may threaten the stability of adults. Youth action and narratives tend to be pathologised as irresponsibility or lack of experience, and consequently young people’s counter-narratives are not taken seriously.

**Contextualising youth counter-narrative**

Neoliberal globalisation weakens social bonds, setting unmoored persons adrift. Giroux (2015:155-6) describes neoliberal globalisation as the spread of “failed sociality”, but perhaps it should be seen as the spread of new and evolving sociality underlined by consumer logic, in which relationships are seen as voluntary, utilitarian, and therefore transient (Bauman 2004). This ethos undermines social relations by encouraging “competitive relations” (Nyamnjoh 2005:295) and privileging a “consumer logic”, even in contexts where capitalist consumption is not well developed (such as much of sub-Saharan Africa). Social relations are increasingly dependent on material gains, especially for the poor and those of lower social status. These conditions evince instability, with social relations gauged by their utilitarian value (Longfield 2004, Nyamnjoh 2005, Groes-Green 2013).

The notion of “at risk” youth (Kelly 2001) is heightened under neoliberal globalisation because of weakening social bonds and the redundancy of old customs. When juxtaposed with emphasis on the enterprising individual who typically makes his or her way in contexts where known rules are inapplicable (Kelly 2001), we see a situation where risk and innovation are two sides of the same coin, of survival and coping with change. In this context counter-narratives can be as much about survival as they are about being at risk. Those who become successful are celebrated as Do-It-Yourself (DIY) success stories, personal histories that are based on individual effort, often without role models. These are life stories where there are no social networks (family, neighbourhood, faith groups) that can guide the young person in the unique challenges that they face. In many instances, these challenges demand solutions which parents and communities are not familiar with.

Social relations are also changing because of the “sexualisation of culture” (Attwood 2006). Changes in communication technology allow for more sexually explicit language, images, and practices (including fashion). The sexualisation of culture blurs the sense of decency and obscenity, seen for instance in the pursuit of “scandal” or making oneself a “spectacle” in order to cultivate interest or to sell stories (Levy 2005). Entertainment and reality television demand spectacle or scandal, and some people make a living delivering these. When it comes to fashion and entertainment, the pornography industry has been very influential (Levy 2005). Sexuality has become a livelihood asset for the unemployed, and those without alternatives (Chant and Evans 2010).

With regards to the growing use of communication technologies (such as the Internet, mobile phones and television) and the spread of “selfie culture” (Giroux 2015), there is an obsessive “self-engagement” and the pursuit of self-gratification. Selfie culture cultivates ontological insecurity in which individuals are continuously self-critiquing and taking advice from their followers or reacting to their views, including wanton bigotry and the perpetuation of negative body image (weight, complexion, shape of buttocks, lips, breasts, noses etc.). Selfie culture is unapologetic in its narcissism, but some young people become famous through their self-promotion and display on social media. Imagined problems with the self are resolved through the acquisition

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1 For example, responding to substance addictions. Many poor communities are not equipped to deal with these challenges. Some families resort to faith healing, although many addictions demand more technical and multi-dimensional solutions.

2 Fashion that is influenced by pornography and burlesque dances e.g. nine-inch heels, thongs and G-strings, corsets and bustiers etc.
of commodities such as clothes and cosmetics, or learning new techniques of photoshopping (Giroux 2015:161), or through body modifications such as skin lightening (Pierre 2008, Picton 2013) and cosmetic surgery. This obsession with the self, with the body and its display, points to and perpetuates weakening solidarity. For older generations in postcolonial societies, skin lightening means that racial domination remains deeply ingrained (Pierre 2008) and challenges the older generation’s sense of political correctness.

Social media has been referred to as “technologies of sexism” (Pham 2015:222-3), peddling narcissistic self-promotion as “choice” and “empowerment”, and promising upward social mobility to the few. These technologies adopt the language of feminism but strip it of its political potency, making it amenable to capitalist marketing ploys (Kinser 2004, Orr 1997).

Feminists have long criticised patriarchy for objectifying women’s bodies through fashion, beauty routines, sexuality, and media images (Levy 2005). Social media challenges feminism by cultivating voyeurism and prejudice – through the male gaze – as choice, enticing women to collaborate with objectification and subjugation. This facilitates the exploitation of women through pornography, and makes entrepreneurs of women who can use the media to sell sexual services (including their own images). Women collaborate with patriarchy as “friends” and “followers”, participating through comments, clicks, visits, likes and dislikes. Because users are making choices (conscientious and otherwise), social media creates agents and objects all at once (Pham 2015). The political question of “agency for what?” does not seem to matter. Agency is seen in being tech-savvy, knowing how to click bait and attract traffic to one’s posts, thus cultivating a following, and knowing what and how much to show to attract the desired interest. Activists of all hues use social media to publicise their causes and to show solidarity with their communities (Pham 2015). Social media has allowed groups that are marginalised to present themselves in favourable light, and to make their concerns more visible (Pham 2015).

Challenges to feminist arguments and thinking

Feminism challenges beliefs and social practices that perpetuate socio-cultural, economic and political inequalities between men and women across different sectors in society, but its demands are increasingly mainstreamed and percolated into homes, communities, and workplaces (Kinser 2004: 124), making it possible to refer to the 2000s as a post-feminist era. “Post-feminism” here refers not to an era after feminist triumphs or the end of inequalities; instead it refers to taken-for-granted changes because of a pervasive feeling that the need for gender equality is commonsensical and its struggles (picketing, marching, petitioning etc.) are less important as governments are compelled to change by regional and international organisations. Younger women disregard feminist arguments and demands, and disavow academic feminist concepts as elitist, conservative and doctrinaire (Orr 1997:40). These changes come with complacency, depoliticisation and commodification of feminist demands and arguments (Kinser 2004:138). In a neoliberal ethos, in which the individual makes herself through the market, “consumer choices” become accessible substitutes for feminism (Kinser 2004: 144). Feminist notions of choice and empowerment have been turned on their heads to refer simplistically to choices in fashion, accessories, self-display, scandal and spectacle. Female youth action can be seen as counter-narratives, but ones whose effects do not change gender relations.

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3 Based on anecdotal evidence, some women earn money in chat rooms talking to men anonymously for a fee. However, with the growth of artificial intelligence, robots increasingly do this too.

4 This is seen in growing calls for children’s (especially girls’) rights, universal primary education, legal majority legislation, workers’ (including maternity leave) rights, domestic violence legislation, and other evolving changes because of feminist demands through the 1990s United Nations (UN) conferences and mechanisms such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their sequel and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well reporting mechanisms to the UN to track governments’ compliance.

5 There are many adverts for consumer whose tag lines mimic feminist notions of empowerment and choice.
Popular culture: scandal, spectacle and “reality”

Through the “sexualisation of culture” (Attwood 2006), reality television driven by the allure of scandal and spectacle, selfie culture (Giroux 2015), competitive relations underwritten by consumer culture (Nyamnjoh 2005), and communication technologies such as cellphones (Archambault 2013), popular culture challenges how women relate to men, how they collaborate, and how women deal with male unemployment. The use of cellphones has allowed young women to have clandestine relations (Archambault 2013), and to flatter men with sexually suggestive messages without the embarrassment typical of face-to-face communication (Nyamnjoh 2005: 314-5, Archambault 2013).

Ostentatious dressing beyond one’s class and income is a growing trend in social media (Pham 2015). It serves the political purpose of rebutting stereotypes of poor people as lacking taste. Through selfie culture young women show their understanding of fashion, trends, cosmetics and other aspects of consumer culture. However it puts pressure on those who look their class to outdo peers in looking the best. Ostentatious dressing leads to some young people borrowing or sharing clothes (Scheld 2007), while others engage in transactional sex to keep up appearances (Nyamnjoh 2005, Groes-Green 2013). Clothes and appearance cultivate aspirations and give the impression of freedom, achievement, and social mobility (Pham 2015). The idea that a lot of effort is exerted on looking like that which one is not points to a mystification of culture. Fashion is about making oneself noticeable and is part of sexual capital – making oneself attractive to ideal partners (Posel 2005). Ideal partners are, of course, a means to sustainability, and a way of accessing the means to keep up appearances (Groes-Green 2013). Although feminism supports sexual choice, the idea that women can find freedom through clothes worn in the male gaze is problematic. These trends involve counter-narratives which older generations of feminists find questionable (see Levy 2005, Attwood 2006).

Selfie culture affords digital (patriarchal) surveillance (Giroux 2015), especially of women, opening them to more condemnation. Cellphones are “digital leashes” on women, allowing men to monitor their mobility and interactions, although those women who survive illicit interactions with men have learnt to hide and erase their digital footprints in order to better conceal their relationships (Archambault 2013).

There is a lot of debate about the “pornographicisation” of music, lyrics and videos, presenting nude, hedonistic women in sexually suggestive dances in strip club scenes (Hunter and Soto 2009, Attwood 2005). Women are presented negatively as drug addicts, sex workers and bad mothers. Some argue that the growth of music videos necessitates a new look at black bodies – women showing that they are desirable and worthy of love (Archambault 2013). In race relations this is an important counter-narrative. Again there are contradictions, especially when female singers collaborate in these productions, providing platforms for talking back and countering male domination. Rap, hip-hop and similar genres remain controversial and contradictory, liberating and oppressive, challenging and extending the status quo (Hunter and Soto 2009).6

Public health: female youth “at risk”?

ABCDEFGs7 of HIV prevention (Mate 2009) are among the strongest dominant messages since the 1980s when HIV emerged. The alphabet soup of HIV prevention is a dominant discourse which has proved malleable to multiple perspectives. Traditionalists and religious authorities prefer to emphasise A and B (abstinence and being faithful), and downplay condom use (Kantor et al 2008, Marindo et al 2003, Betts et al 2003). For them, the other letters are problematic and challenge existing age and gender privileges, undermining male dominance. For the same reason, comprehensive sex education is resisted and incomplete information about sexuality is preferred as a way of controlling young women, while in fact perpetuating their risk (Kantor et al 2008, Mugweni et al 2014). Rights activists, by contrast, include all letters for their campaigns, emphasising individual responsibility (van Eerdewijk 2001). However young women persuaded by rights arguments are confronted by dominant discourses of blame and stereotyping for the immorality of their actions, even though young women have become breadwinners through transactional sex, and are looking after unemployed male and older female kin (Groes-Green 2013).

While HIV epidemiology shows that young women are vulnerable because of the prevalence of hypergamy (marrying older and...
In order to celebrate the counter-narratives of young women, researchers find themselves confronted by controversies and contradictions and must be cautious of celebrating false utopias. Young women in Africa are increasingly bold and are bucking traditional dictates.

economically dominant men) which supports power inequality in marriage, HIV prevention campaigns have tended to focus more on young women as blameworthy. Hypergamy per se has not been the subject of campaigns. Young women dating male youth incapable of rites of passage (such as marriage rites and founding independent households) because of prevailing unemployment, find themselves in episodic sexual relations in which gift exchange is as much about the desire for consumer goods, emotional and economic security as about tradition, but also perpetuates power inequalities between men and women (Chant and Evans 2010, Groes-Green 2013, Swidler and Watkins 2007).

In Maputo (Mozambique), young women have combined traditional knowledge about the body, herbs and practices to enhance eroticism, to seduce and attract older male partners with disposable incomes for purposes of transactional sex (Groes-Green 2013:109-110). Ideal partners include expatriates who are expected to give gifts, money for clothes, hairpieces, cosmetics, entertainment, rent and upkeep as well to care for relatives. Young women refer to their partners as “automated teller machines” (ATMs) or milking cows. Those who do not share money from sex with poor relatives are condemned, and are also accused of manipulating their lovers through herbs and magic creating sexual dependence of the wealthy on the younger women. This fear and admiration of African women’s eroticism perpetuates western racial and gender stereotypes.

In Malawi, transactional sex offers safety nets to those who are vulnerable (Swidler and Watkins 2007). In African culture, men with disposable incomes are expected to share. The resources young women get from transactional sex assist poor families when food is short, during illness, or to cover funeral expenses. These relationships are part of survival strategies (Swidler and Watkins 2007, Chant and Evans 2010). However where transactional sex is also about multiple partners, it is clearly seen as risky. In Cote D’Ivoire, young women are far from passive, helpless victims of older men’s sexual demands (Longfield 2004). The young women rank their multiple partners as “rich fools” or “spare tyres” from whom different sets of resources and gifts are obtained. Some of these men are lucky to get sex when they want it, while others are manipulated to part with their resources. The young women need money for personal upkeep, including school expenses.

The undercurrent of condemnation remains, with young women seen as cunning, greedy and not trustworthy (Nyamnjoh 2005, Groes-Green 2013). In Dakar (Senegal) (Nyamnjoh 2006) shows that young women enticed into fashion and global consumption are creative in their seduction and manipulation of men, using their beauty, fashionable clothing, and being seen in certain spaces (Longfield 2004). Some invited the men they desired using cellphones. These young women, referred to as disquettes, are likened to stiffy computer disks, portable and capable of carrying a lot of data. The young women were condemned for their capacity to remake themselves (being re-formattable), by pretending virginity, and having the capacity to engage in multiple partner sex. They were also condemned for being materialistic, interested in generous men with beautiful cars, large houses, expensive cellphones, and healthy bank balances. The Dakarois young women refer to men as fish: yabobs (bony, rather cumbersome to eat and mostly eaten by the poor) are young virile men without money who are likely to infect one with a disease, and thiofs (a sought after fish dish) are men with disposable income. In Dakar, as elsewhere, there were concerns that these interactions were risky economically and socially.8

There are debates about whether transactional sex’s similarities to prostitution are a sign of moral degradation, although there is evidence that in traditional courtship gift exchange was a normal means by which men communicated interest in women (Groes-Green 2013, Swidler and Watkins 2007). Cultures are challenged when consumer logic is used by young women to select, seduce and retain men. Nyamnjoh (2005) observes that this is “consumerism gone awry.

The idea of “consumerism gone awry” is also seen in South Africa where a young woman started a dating site (Blesser Finder) in which older men with money can meet young women in need of money and gifts (Adams 2016). The idea that casual sex with married men is a blessing challenges both Christianity and feminism. Christian preaching encourages adherents to pray for blessings and miracles, and for Pentecostals these are seen through conspicuous consumption.6 However given so much inequality and unemployment, the poor find it difficult to feel blessed. The more they seek God’s favour, the more they are open to scams and abuse. This particularly affects young women who desire marriage to well-to-do men as a way out of poverty, and the means to participate in global consumer culture. Blesser are married men with disposable income, and are graded from levels 1 to 4. The highest level blesser can afford shopping trips to Dubai, rent, designer clothes, cars and so on, while level 1 blesser buy airline and fastfoods. The anonymity of social media allows married men and young women to interact clandestinely online.

Debates for and against blesser6 have brought to the fore the pervasiveness of transactional sex. It is part of popular culture, and marks the modernisation of sugar daddy culture. Men are now evaluated by what they can do with their disposable income. Women are achieving

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8 Historically, Senegal has a low HIV prevalence but concerns with HIV were there (Nyamnjoh 2005:309). Some men risked loss of property after being drugged by disquettes.

9 The notion of the Gospel of prosperity is at issue.

10 #moralsmustfall, #upgradeyourworth, #antiblesser
upward mobility through gifts from blessers (especially level 4 blessers). Here we see the idea of DIY selves at work; of young women working their way out of poverty through entrepreneurship and creativity, taking advantage of technology, sexuality and evolving social norms.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In the cultural practices of female youth engaging global consumer culture we see a combination of “subversion of culture”, creativity in fashioning survival strategies based on tradition, and dealing with current problems of survival (Nyamnjoh 2005:297, Groes-Green 2013, Archambault 2013). While these strategies can be described as counter-narratives, they are individualistic and it is debatable whether they fundamentally change relations between men and women, young and old. Young women generally embrace the sexist practices of the new technologies in a blind determination to participate in global consumer culture. The DIY approaches of other aspects of popular culture (e.g. music, video production, and forms of entertainment that seem to draw from the pornography industry) is disconcerting for feminist politics. Popular culture is both emancipatory and contradictory (Hunter and Soto 2009).

In order to celebrate the counter-narratives of young women, researchers find themselves confronted by controversies and contradictions and must be cautious of celebrating false utopias. Young women in Africa are increasingly bold and are bucking traditional dictates.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Rekopantswe Mate is a sociologist/social anthropologist by training. She is a senior lecturer in the Sociology Department, University of Zimbabwe. She did her undergraduate studies at the University of Zimbabwe. She did postgraduate training at Wageningen University and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in the Netherlands, Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR). Her research interests are in youth studies (sexuality, family relations and pastimes).

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YOUNG WOMEN CHALLENGING AND RESISTING dominant cultural narratives


The Tale of the Empty Seat:
Young women and decision making in Africa

Lauren Tracey-Temba

Notwithstanding the progress made in formal political equality, women, particularly young women, are still at the periphery when it comes to real power and decision making. This article will demonstrate that, while continental policy frameworks have improved greatly in recent years, there is still a disconnect between what these policies say should be achieved and the narratives of women, particularly young women, on the ground. Finally, the author will consider how this negatively impacts on the important role that young women and other youths can play in Africa’s development.

African countries are often lauded for the progress they have made in gender equality and women’s political representation and participation on the continent (Ighobor, 2015). In most African countries, legal frameworks are in place to give men and women political equality through an equal opportunity to vote, become a member of parliament or political party, and to be elected as a president. In addition, the continent has seven of the top 20 countries with the highest number of women represented in Parliament (UN Women, 2017). Rwanda, for example, holds the record for the highest number of women parliamentarians (61 percent) in the world (ibid).

In Africa, young men and women under the age of 35 account for approximately 65 percent of the total population. Of this, young people between the ages of 15 and 35 years account for over 35 percent (African Union Youth Division (AUYD), 2017). Given their sheer strength in numbers and the other advantages associated with their age, youth present a huge potential resource economically, socially and politically. On the other hand, if not fully invested in their societies, they can also pose considerable risk to stability. Examples of this in Africa can be seen in the recruitment of young women into terrorist networks such as ISIS (Ondieki, Otsiako, Okwany & Achuka, 2016). African youth also have little interest in voting and instead increasingly become involved in disruptive and sometimes violent public protest as a form of political expression (Tracey, 2016).

Because the future prosperity of Africa is dependent on the investments made in the youth, it is important to nurture the aspirations...
of the emerging generations. Consequently, over the last three years, the African Union (AU) has strategically focused its mandate on youth empowerment, with a particular focus on young women, so as to include their views and concerns in all its activities (AU Commission (AUC), 2013). While this strategic focus on women’s rights and youths in Africa is commendable, it is clear that there is still much more to be done if the benefits of fully empowered and engaged young women are to be realised in Africa. 

**The hope provided by African policy frameworks**

At the AU’s fourth High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance in 2015 with the theme of ‘Women’s Equal Participation and Leadership in Political Parties in Africa’, the AU Commission was urged by member states to set up a continental programme aimed at assisting political parties to enhance women’s political participation (Kwibuka, 2015). This could be achieved, explained the Commission, by ensuring women increasingly hold positions of power, encouraging more countries to adopt quotas for women in leadership positions, and implementing skills programmes to equip women to participate fully in decision making (Kwibuka, 2015). As part of the AU Agenda 2063, a blueprint for the long-term development of Africa, member states have been urged to build ‘An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children’ (AUC, 2015). 

As part of the AU Agenda 2063, a blueprint for the long-term development of Africa, member states have been urged to build ‘An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children’ (AUC, 2015, p. 8). Member states are thus also expected to ensure that there is ‘full gender parity, with women occupying at least 50 per cent of elected public offices at all levels and half of managerial positions in public and private sectors’ (p. 9). In the last two decades, recognition of the need to empower girls, adolescents and young women has also become a key feature of African development models (Hickel, 2014). With a little over a year left until the end of the AU African Youth Decade Plan of Action 2009-2018, it is an opportune time to assess the progress made in empowering not only the youth generally, but young women in particular, towards enhancing their participation in democratic governance.

The 2016 Ibrahim Index of African Governance revealed that overall governance in Africa has improved in 37 of the 54 African countries (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2016). This finding suggests that as much as 70 percent of all African citizens live in a country that has seen improvements in key governance areas such as human development, participation, human rights, and sustainable economic opportunities (ibid).

Africa boasts an extensive and progressive body of legal frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality, enhancing youth participation and empowering women (AU, 2016). There are a number of instruments aimed directly at women and youth including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), AU legal framework on gender and women’s rights, and African Youth Charter – a continental framework aimed at promoting the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of the youth. In addition to these, the overarching African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) commits AU member states to promote and nurture democratic and participatory governance.

The Maputo Protocol is considered one of the most progressive women’s rights instruments globally. However, of the 55 AU member states, only 38 have ratified the Protocol, limiting its full potential (Aling’o & Abdulmelik, 2017). Furthermore, domestication through the implementation of national laws and policies by those who have ratified it has been slow, particularly in the area of discriminatory socio-cultural practices, such as the lack of rights to land and inheritance, and continued harmful practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, which contribute to maternal mortality (Kombo, Sow & Mohamed, 2013). Such practices underpinned by patriarchal attitudes subordinate young women’s roles in social, economic and political development.

The AU’s African Youth Decade Plan of Action is aimed at achieving the goals and objectives outlined in the African Youth Charter, particularly with regards to employment, education and governance (AUYD, 2017). As with the Maputo Protocol, however, only 38 of the 55 AU member states have ratified the Charter (Aling’o & Abdulmelik, 2017). According to Article 11 of the Charter, ‘every young person shall have the right to participate in all spheres of society’, and state parties need to ‘ensure access to young men and young women to participate in decision making and in fulfilling civic duties’ (AU Youth Charter, 2017, p. 6). One of the key objectives of the African Youth Decade Plan is to raise youth’s representation and participation in inter-governmental and decision-making processes (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2).

However, observers, such as Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi (2016) and Tracey (2016), note that there are still wide gaps between the reality and the aspirations of the African Youth Charter and the AU’s African Youth Decade Plan of Action, particularly in the political
participation and civic engagement of youth. This highlights that even though the legislative frameworks are there, the reality faced by youth, and specifically young women, is still one full of hurdles and, in many cases, exclusion. Hence, there is a need to ensure that the legislative frameworks are effectively implemented through systematic monitoring in all of their areas, including employment, education and governance, to include youth and especially young women. Equally important is the need to ensure that no young woman is left out of these efforts as the participation of illiterate, rural young women must be guaranteed as well as that of educated, urban young woman.

At the 61st session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 61), a key focus of the discussions was the need to place greater investment in young women for transformative and sustainable economic development (GIMAC, 2017, p. 2). Yet, it seems that while the empowerment of young women is increasingly and internationally acknowledged as necessary for economic, social and political development, the reality presents a different picture. Women continue to suffer a disproportionate disadvantage to that of their male counterparts, as commonly seen, for example, in areas such as the labour market. At a continental level, there is a need to increase strategies and approaches that specifically focus on this potential demographic dividend.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that undeniable progress has been made at the continental level in the provision of legal frameworks on gender equality, enhancing youth participation and empowering women, but there is a lack of effective mechanisms for the implementation of these frameworks due to inadequate institutional reforms that keep pace with new developments, and a lack of financial wherewithal to carry through needed reforms. Added to this is the lack of comprehensive legislation that recognises and caters for the multiple roles of youth and especially young women to enable them to participate fully in social, economic and political development.

**The reality of young women’s lived experiences**

It has been well recognised that young women and girls can contribute significantly to economic development and poverty reduction on the African continent (Hickel, 2014). The discussion above, however, emphasises that while young women make up at least half of the youth demographic, there is often little attention paid to them in policies, legal provisions and programmes. Arguably, interventions aimed at empowering women often focus on adult women in general rather than young women (Aling’o & Abdulmelik, 2017). Young women, however, are typically disproportionately affected by challenges facing youth, such as high unemployment, inadequate access to quality education and health care, ongoing poverty, violence and conflict (AUC, 2013). In societies where adult men are the prime beneficiaries, they typically face double discrimination. This notably limits the possibilities for young women to participate in politics and government or private sector decision making.

Education plays an important role in supporting social change and is also a crucial link for the attainment of other development goals (Elder & Kring, 2016). Increasing the number of educated women provides tangible benefits in economic growth, social development and political participation. Indeed, there are notable improvements made in some African countries around access to education for young people, such as in Uganda, one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to have a free universal secondary education policy, and in Ghana, through capacitation grants which take the burden of education costs off parents by providing free access to quality education (Costin, Montoya & Mundy, 2015). However, in many African countries, there are still key factors that structurally disadvantage young women in education, and these require specific interventions.
It is clear from the reality on the ground, however, that young women will require increased opportunities and targeted initiatives to ensure that their involvement is constructive. Initiatives could include programmes that will enable their empowerment politically, economically and socially.

For example, the African continent contains the largest number of countries with the highest rates of child marriages and adolescent pregnancies globally, with ‘between 30 and 51 per cent of girls giving birth before they are 18’ (Human Rights Watch, 2017). However, while the highest number of pregnancies is among young women, African governments often fail to address the harmful and discriminatory practices and policies that contribute to this avoidable situation.

In many African countries, pregnant students continue to be expelled from school. As a 19-year-old female from northern Tanzania explains, ‘Teachers found out I was pregnant, I found out that no student is allowed to stay in school if they are pregnant... I didn’t have the information [sexual education] about pregnancies and what would happen’ (Human Rights Watch, 2017). She was expelled from school at age 17. Another 18-year-old female from South Sudan explains how her uncle stopped her from going to school in order to have her marry an older man she did not know: ‘I would wish to return to school even if I have children. People think that I am happy but I am not because I don’t have an education. I don’t have something of my own and I am only cleaning offices. If I had gone to secondary school, I would get a good job’ (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Hickel (2014, p. 1356) illustrates how policies that are meant to ‘strengthen women’s empowerment by expanding access to the labour market and access to credit, often end up placing these women in new forms of inferior positions as workers, consumers and debtors.’ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016), youth unemployment in the developing world is expected to increase by half a million between 2015 and 2017. In South Africa, for example, over half of the youth actively looking for employment remained unemployed in 2016, making it the country with the highest youth unemployment rate (ILO, 2016, p. 5). Hence, it is important that new policies and programmes are developed so they do not negatively impact on young women.

While there has been a downward trend in the last few years in the number of youth that are either underemployed or unemployed from 53.3 percent (2000) to 45.8 percent (2016), wide disparities exist between young men and young women globally (ILO, 2016). For example, among young people aged between 15 and 24 years old, labour participation by young men is notably higher at 53.9 percent, compared with young women at 37.3 percent (p. 19). In some African countries, a large proportion of young women are locked out of the labour market.

In North Africa, for example, there is a 20.3 percentage point difference between male and female participation in the labour market (p. 20).

In many countries, the challenges young people continue to face, such as unemployment, often negatively affect the likelihood of their participation in formal democratic processes including elections (Tracey, 2016). For some young women, experiences with unemploy‑ment are particularly frustrating. A 21-year-old female student from South Africa explains, ‘People go to study but when we look for a job, people want experience. How do we get experience if we do not get a chance to train to get the job we want?’ (Tracey, 2016, p. 12). In addition to various other socioeconomic challenges they face, young unemployed people often become desperate for the promise of a better life and opportunities that could help foster this. Hence, they are more easily recruited for criminal activities, as this 18-year-old female South African student explains:

*I think the most important problem facing South Africa is the unemployment rate, which results in crime – people just find stealing as a mode of survival. People do not work; people do not have anything for their families to put on the table to eat. In order for them to survive, they need to steal, which is a wake-up call to government. But they are doing nothing* (Tracey, 2016, p. 12).

Vulnerable youth and, more recently, young women, have increasingly become involved in radical extremist groups by playing a role as violent actors and victims or, alternatively, they are playing a role in prevention and peacebuilding (Cachalia, Salifu & Ndung’u, 2016; Ondieki et al., 2016). Young women’s involvement in extremism is often as a result of feelings of exclusion and subordination, or they are driven by social and political agency (Cachalia et al., 2016, p. 21).

In their civic and political engagement, young women’s feelings of exclusion are often further exacerbated by the persistent gender gaps they face in democratic processes such as elections. In a recent study conducted by Afrobarometer on the political engagement of African youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years in 36 African countries (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi (2016) highlight that there is little difference in the voting behaviour of young women and young men, with 64 percent and 66 percent respectively voting during an election. Young women, however, are still far less likely to be representatives in parliament. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 23 percent of parliamentary representatives are young women. This figure, however, is much lower in Arab states at a mere 18 percent (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2).

Despite the various AU policies targeted at gender equality, young women continue to present lower levels of political activism than their male counterparts (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2). The
Afrobarometer study highlights significantly lower levels of political interest among young women (48 percent), than young men (60 percent) (p. 3). In addition, these young women (49 percent) are also less likely than young men (58 percent) to take part in community meetings and other platforms that allow them to raise issues of concern (p. 19). Part of the reason for this is that women are often more harshly judged than their male counterparts and face various sociocultural barriers to participation (Chirwa-Ndanga, 2017).

Young women are increasingly expressing their interest and need to play a role in their communities. This can be seen at the decision-making level through their participation in formal democratic processes, such as taking part in elections or holding leadership positions in political parties, and through informal interventions, such as involvement in protest action and radical groups. It is clear from the reality on the ground, however, that young women will require increased opportunities and targeted initiatives to ensure that their involvement is constructive. Initiatives could include programmes that will enable their empowerment politically, economically and socially. It is even more important that the AU, member states and policymakers need to play a role in their communities. This can be seen at the decision-making level through their participation in formal democratic processes, such as taking part in elections or holding leadership positions in political parties, and through informal interventions, such as involvement in protest action and radical groups. It is clear from the reality on the ground, however, that young women will require increased opportunities and targeted initiatives to ensure that their involvement is constructive. Initiatives could include programmes that will enable their empowerment politically, economically and socially. It is even more important that the AU, member states and policymakers

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Tracey-Temba is a researcher in the justice and violence prevention programme at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Her research focuses on issues of governance, crime and justice, particularly as it relates to youth and their democratic participation in Africa. She has over seven years’ experience in leading and designing large-scale research projects. She has contributed to various African Union (AU) high level dialogues on democracy, human rights and governance as well as AU/ African Governance architecture regional youth consultations and peace-building workshops on Project 2016 – Year of Human Rights, which focused on the rights of women.

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Xê boy, do not speak politics and the antidemocratic culture

– Waldamar Bastos

When writing about the political participation of young people (especially young women) in Angola, it is important to consider the Angolan reality.

The country was born in 1975 with the proclamation of independence by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), in contravention of the Agreement of Alvor. This agreement provided for the creation of a transitional government and the proclamation of independence by an external entity, apart from the three political movements who were part of the accord – the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), the MPLA, and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). This never actually happened.

Following independence there were 27 years of civil war, involving abuse of power, nepotism, disregard for human rights, political persecution, and summary executions by the organs of state (the police and the army).

The events of 27 May 1977 have been described as a holocaust by Américo Cardoso 2007. There were allegations of executions in the dead of night, imprisonment of Angolans and others (some of them pregnant), many of them taken from their families, raped and tortured to death for their political ideas, or for claiming discriminatory and oppressive social and racial practices similar to those of the colonial system before independence.

There was no freedom of demonstration, of association, or of the press. This reality remains to this day in Angola, where basic rights (such as the right to life, basic sanitation, food, education, quality health, development, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to demonstrate, and to the political pluralism enshrined in the constitutions of 1992 and 2010) are completely ignored by the government of President José Eduardo

1 This phrase is the refrain of the song titled “Velha Chica” by the great Angolan artist Waldemar Bastos, denouncing the misery experienced by the Angolan people. The main message portrays the political and economic reality lived in Angola during the colonial period, where those who claimed their rights and questioned the misery and poverty were “talking politics” and so could be arrested or killed by authorities. And so the adults advised (and still advise): “Boy, do not talk politics”, which means “do not complain.”

2 To read the Acordo de Alvor (Alvor Accord) is available online at http://cedis.fdl.unl.pt/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ACORDO-ALVOR.pdf.

3 For reports about 27 May 1977, see Nuvemnegra: o drama do 27 de Maio de 1977 (sobrevivente do massacre), Miguel Francisco “Michel” – 2007; Memórias de entre o cárcere e o cemitério, Américo Cardoso Botelho – 2007; Purgaem Angola, Dalila Cabrita Mateus & Álvaro Mateus – 2007.
dos Santos, in power since 1979. Instead, there is widespread use of violence contrary to the principles of governance, corruption, violation of rights, and misery.¹

This is the Angolan reality, past and present. But does it have to be the future? This is the question young people seem to be asking, and it is the focus of this article.

Young voices, mobilisation and participation in the public sphere of politics in Angola

Data from the 2014 census confirms that the Angolan population is extremely young. It has been the young people who are the main promoters of claims for political change.

There is a strong mobilisation by the young population in Angola, a movement small in numbers but with actions impacting against the status quo of the country. The first official youth mobilisation took place on 7 March 2011, a demonstration called through social networks, demanding the exit of the President. The police violently suppressed the demonstration, arresting some of the participants, most notably the journalist Ana Margoso, who was covering the event at the time.²

Other demonstrations were held, always called with early communication to the organs of the provincial government, as provided for in the law of assembly and demonstration. All of them were repressed violently, with kidnappings, torture, executions, arrests, and intimidation. This was a non-homogeneous movement, consolidating itself only around specific common purposes.


From seventeen youth activists to 15 + 2

Laurinda Gouveia participated in the first demonstration on 7 March 2011, called via Facebook and supported by the Angolan rapper Ikonoclasta. She was 22 years old. At this point people who did not know each other joined the march. At the time they did not have the label of revolutionaries, and were known only as university students or demonstrators. The main motivation for joining this event, according to Laurinda Gouveia, is because she believed it was possible in this way to solve basic problems such as lack of electricity, health, quality education, access to drinking water, and basic sanitation.³

Laurinda had witnessed medical malpractice cases in the country’s largest hospital (Josina Machel), and she hoped that it was possible to address the situation through her participation in the demonstration. She felt motivated and hoped that the realities of the population could change.⁴

She also believed, together with the promoters of the demonstration, that the greatest obstacle to a better life for Angolan women and men was the President of the Republic, José Eduardo dos Santos, who was supposed to have stepped down from power. Instead he appropriated the country as if it were the property of his father or mother.

This movement, dubbed a revolutionary one, does not exist. It is just a group of young people with a common aim to have a fairer and more equal Angola for all, who have organised and participated in demonstrations, marches and other activities to promote access to basic rights and respect for democratic principles.

Their activities included debating sessions and training (for women and men) in political and ideological terms, performed with some regularity in Luanda.

On 20 June 2015, the young people had planned to study the sixth chapter of the brochure “The Inevitable Need for Strategic Planning” when they debated the group’s structure and ideological philosophy. The meeting was raided by agents of the Criminal Investigation Service, who collected all personal belongings of the people present (personal computers, copies of the brochure, phones, flash drives, external disks, pens, backpacks, bicycles, etc.), including the board. Thirteen young men were handcuffed and taken to the Radio Patrol Unit, before being sent to prison.

Initially, they were accused of an “attempted coup”, but later this was changed to the criminal charge of “association with wrongdoers”.³ Defendants were constituted in this process. In addition to the thirteen, two more young men were arrested who were not in the room, Domingos da Cruz and Osvaldo Caholo. Domingos was arrested on 21 June in Santa Clara, and Osvaldo on 24 June at his home.

Rosa Conde and Laurinda Gouveia were indicted on 31 August. Before that they had been pronounced only as declarants (respondents). On 16 November 2015, a trial began, with the defendants still
imprisoned. The sentence was only read in March 2016, with a sentence of between two and eight years in prison. There was an appeal to the Supreme Court, but the convicted were sent to jail, where they remained until the enactment of a presidential amnesty law.

**Rose and Laurinda and the revolutionary movement: 15 + Two**

Up until this time, the press had generally referred to the case as “the seventeen activists”, not mentioning that they had women in this group (although some had indicated this fact). This is how it had been reported and commented on in the various mass media and by the population in general.

Among human rights activists and on social networks, a movement was consolidating in defence of the young activists, who dubbed the process “15+2”, because at first only 15 men were detained and later two women (Rosa Conde and Laurinda Gouveia). This was intended to give visibility to the course that the process was taking, including now other people who were not present at the meeting on 20 June. It also served to make visible the disparity of women’s participation in active politics and movements, given that in this case it was 15 men and only two women.

In addition, some women feminists (and non-feminists) created a movement in support of the group, giving greater prominence to the two women defendants by appropriating the term “15 + Two” rather than just 17. The adoption 15 + Two (as opposed to 15+2) was deliberate and strategic, as it served to remove any doubts as to the presence of the two women in this group and in this struggle.

This movement spread through the media (although mostly still under the banner of the initial acronym of 15+2), and young people promptly adopted this term. And so a small solidarity movement formed all over the world. In this context, the page on Facebook called LAPA (Freedom for the Arrested Activists in Angola) was published, where all the actions were publicised in support of the case, as well as daily appeals from individuals and non-governmental organisations for the release of the young people.

Significantly, a Facebook page “Supporting the Heroines of Freedom Rosa & Laurinda + 15” was also created at this time, bringing the “Two” into the foreground and the centre of the struggle, instead of depicting them as the additions to the 15. This new Facebook page served to highlight and spread information on the process, a lot of it shared from the LAPA page. The important point is that Rosa and Laurinda were made more prominent through this counter-narrative, whereas they had almost been ignored in the focus and emphasis that people put on the 15 men. There was an incessant search in the media for information on the two women, to understand their backgrounds and their activism. This was not the case before the Facebook page, since the focus had previously been just 15+2 and referenced generally. The biographies and testimonies of the Two while they were in prison were recorded by a group of feminist women, of which I was also a member.

This story demonstrates that it was – and still is – essential to deliberately give visibility to women in spaces that are predominantly identified as male domains. There were concrete actions taken by women (and some men) to make it possible to draw attention to the role of these two women who had dared to challenge not only the political system, but also patriarchy that consigns the majority of women to the condition of subalternity.

The revolutionary movement in Angola identifies itself as being composed of young people from various social backgrounds, at various levels of training or without any training, partisans or non-partisans, religious or atheists, employed or unemployed, self-educated or educated. We are children of peasants and of the wealthy, we are in the gutter and in the offices too, we live in the
The history of Angolan women continues to be hidden in the gender-specific grammar of (for example) political prisoners and revolutionaries. This makes the male the model to which women must adjust. 

The involvement of women in political affairs in the public sphere in Angola dates back before independence with Nzinga Mbandi and Kimpa Vita. There are also officially unrecognised heroines, whose accounts were published in the book *O livro da paz da mulherangolana – Heroínasessemnome* (The Book of Peace for Angolan Women – Heroines Without a Name)*4, beside the well-known Deolinda Rodrigues, Lucrécia Palm, Engraça Santos, Irene Cohen and Teresa Afonso.

However, it is still very strong in the collective imagination that the place of women is in the home (taking care of husband and children), an inheritance reinforced by the colonial system that placed black indigenous women at the base of the pyramid of rights and citizenship – a reflection of Judeo-Christian morality.

Most of the women who participated in the national liberation struggle have not had any kind of recognition; they are not in any history book of Angola, and have not received military honours and rank in life or death. And this is what would happen to the two women in the 15 + Two process, when reference was only to “the seventeen activists”. It was the deliberate counter-narrative created through the mobilisation of many women (and some men) that ensured the public recognition of Rosa and Laurinda in the narrative of 2016 youth engagement in the politics of this country.

The history of Angolan women continues to be hidden in the gender-specific grammar of (for example) political prisoners and revolutionaries. This makes the male the model to which women must adjust. The resistance movement and its involvement in political struggles is significant, and today throughout the country we follow these reports, but we still need to expand the gender lenses in writing, and challenge the dominant male-centric narratives in the media, which exclude and hide the agency and role of women.

The first challenge is to give visibility to these stories and include everyone (men and women) in this political journey, without generalisations that exclude and conceal us as women. We will then have more motivated women, since the ancestors demonstrated that we equally belong in the public space. The Angolan Women’s Peace Book is an example of collecting the political and life histories of several women in six provinces of the country. Without this effort to counter the dominant exclusionary narratives, we would never have been (re)known.

We still have the historical debt to bring to the fore the stories of the partners of the young people involved in the 15 + Two process. They were mentioned very infrequently in the media. For example, it was inspiring to hear an interview with Esperança Gongá, wife of Domingos da Cruz, talking about the situation of the country and the abuse of power of the Angolan police and judicial forces, but unfortunately it was only broadcast by Rádio Angola. The world needs to also hear and know the other actions carried out by this group of women, their sisters, mothers and others who directly and indirectly contributed to this struggle, but who never featured in the media.

We also need to create counter-narratives to the predominant stories of women cast through sexist education and socialisation processes. Sexist education has been reinforced by means of coercion by the state (through patriarchal education models), family socialisation systems, and religious systems that confine women to the private domestic space (as homemakers). It is still strongly rooted in the minds of men and women that gender determines competencies, and this places women in a position of subalternity. This mentality also manifests itself in the attitudes of some young people in the revolutionary movement, expressed in the social networks. The change of attitude needs to be general.

This sexist mentality makes women more vulnerable. For example, in police assaults, women are more likely to be sexually assaulted, or subjected to torture in the genitals or breasts. That is why they are sometimes afraid. According to Laurinda, there were women who started off as part of this movement, but who gave up due to incessant police violence. It is important to review the gender division of labour, especially the sharing of household chores and child-care, to allow women the time to be directly involved in public spaces. The weight of domestic activities is still too heavy for most Angolan women.
At the same time, it is necessary to promote the creation of women’s and feminist movements, as well as other spaces that are open to discuss gender and power relations in Angolan society, and to begin to create counter-narratives, as happened on the Facebook page “Supporting the Heroines of Freedom Rosa & Laurinda + 15”. The gender issue should be treated as a cross-cutting theme in all areas, together with the deconstruction of male and female stereotypes.

Despite the very adverse reality, it is true that resistance to injustices in Angola has been maintained by the young – including women who are increasingly aware of their right to get directly involved in movements, and also to create specific ones such as Ondjango Feminista, an autonomous feminist movement of activism, solidarity, and education for the realisation of the human rights of all the women and girls in Angola founded in 2016.

These initiatives create spaces that confront the dictatorial and patriarchal system designed to exclude the population, and especially the women.

The struggle continues! Viva counter-narratives!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Florita Telo is an Angolan PhD student focusing on interdisciplinary studies on women, gender and feminism at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). She holds a Masters degree in human rights from the Federal University of Paraíba - Brazil. She graduated in law from Agostinho Neto University (Angola). Telo is a feminist activist for human rights and is a founding member of the Ondjango Feminista Collective. She is also the founder and vice-President of the Angolan Association Observatory of Public Policies on Gender. She is also a member of the group of feminist studies in politics and education at the UFBA, and the laboratory of studies and research in lesbianism at the Federal University of the Recôncavo of Bahia. Telo is a columnist of Correio Angolense newspaper.

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FOOTNOTES

STUDENT ACTIVISM AND YOUTH AGENCY in Botswana

Resego Natalie Kgosidintsi

Introduction

‘Underground beneath plains of concrete where no bird sings, the revolution will hatch’ – Duma Gideon Boko, Leader of Umbrella for Democratic Change

The participation of young people in the political and governance sphere of Botswana has been worrisome for the longest time. This has been primarily because of factors including, but not limited to, general apathy among young people regarding the crucial issues and lack of active inclusion by those in control of creating and shaping the political and governance environment. The direction of the country has been largely shaped by people outside the youth category. But, over the past decade, young African people have developed an interest in taking part in shaping the agenda of the country. This has been through active participation in university politics and massive student revolutions to hold those in positions of power to account.

Young people, especially students, have been regarded as rebellious. In the late 1980s, Beverley Burr (1988, p. 1) stated, ‘Sometimes their rebellion has been limited to their own immediate concerns, such as the conditions of work and life on campus. But, sometimes the anger has been motivated by and linked to events off campus and little connected with the immediate processes of education.’ For the past decade, the parliamentary constituency of the University of Botswana has been mostly decided by the university population through the general elections.

Youth agency on matters of national interest has had upward mobility and the high rate of unemployment has perhaps forced them to stand up and take note of the world they live in and what they envision after completing their qualification. We have seen the rise of a movement in mid-2016 in Botswana under the name of #UnemploymentMovement, which sought to galvanise support among unemployed young people to give them a focal point for engaging the government and forcing it to take a firm position on its policies to curb high rates of unemployment. It aimed to do so by holding demonstrations as indicated in the Sunday Standard. “They intend to hold a peaceful demonstration on August 8th 2016 and on August 13th they intend to hand over a written petition citing all of their concerns to the relevant Ministers. In this petition there will be a set timeframe for them to get a response and once the timeframe lapses it is when they will encourage the youth to boycott all the BOT50 events.”

The idea of boycotting BOT50 events, which were Independence celebrations marking 50 years, was because the government has set aside a budget of BWP 100 million which they felt could have been diverted to resolving pressing issues of youth unemployment.

The movement sought to petition the legislators to take unemployment as a national crisis. The spokesperson Kesaobaka Maruping stated “that their movement considers the rate of unemployment a national crisis and they are calling to policy makers to make means of creating sustainable employment for the multitudes of graduates churned out by tertiary institutions across the country. He further stated that they intend to use all forms of mainstream media and social media platforms to spread their message to the youth across the country and ultimately establish branches across the regions for further mobilisation.”

The Movement held demonstrations and in the city center which culminated in the riot squad being unleashed onto the protestors. Very many people were beaten and the movement leadership was incarcerated for three days. There was that brave and selfless activist, Mr Jones Banda was at the forefront, he was...
beaten and shoved into the back of a police van. Upon his release he was quoted on The Voice Botswana saying “Forward we march, there is no going back now, enough is enough we cannot take the suffering anymore!”

Other struggles can be unfolding within a perceived bigger struggle, as is the case for women. This is one important group that has been left behind and we have been massively underrepresented in decision-making structures and in the general involvement in the political landscape. Our role has been reduced and limited to the occupancy of positions which have little or no influence in the course of a revolution. For instance, during political rallies, women are only appointed as directors of ceremonies while men deliver most of the content. This has created a disproportionate and skewed perception on how men and women are viewed in society and how they acquire political and social capital which apportions responsibility in societies.

The failure to incorporate women into mainstream politics from grass root levels is clearly manifest, even at the national political level. As one of the beacon of ‘hope for democracy’ since independence, according to the National Democratic Institute’s Regional Director for Africa, Daniel Fomunyoh (2017, p. 3), it is particularly disturbing that Botswana has only ever had fewer than ten women representatives at a time elected into the General Assembly (a meager 6.6 percent of the seats in Parliament in 2009) (Ntibinyane, 2011), the highest legislative body that makes and implements laws which directly affect women and girls as the citizen majority. This can hardly be called democracy.

**A history of student activism in Botswana**

‘I was not born with a hunger to be free... It was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken from me, that I began to hunger for it’ – Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), former South African President

Botswana is often embraced as a nation of peace, which prioritises diplomatic means of conflict resolution, but that has not stopped the emergence of robust and, at times, aggressive student activism. Politics and political parties penetrated the corridors of the University of Botswana as early as the 1980s. The main politically affiliated movements back then were the Movement Against the Suppression of Students (MASS-BNF), an affiliate of the Botswana National Front, and the Gaborone Cell No. 26 (GS-26) of the Botswana Democratic Party. At a later stage, there were new entrants to the university politics in the names of the University of Botswana Congress for Democracy (UB-CD) and the Basco Student Movement for Democracy (BSMD). These have been the main parties dominating political circles and shaping student demonstrations at the University. They have changed power between themselves for the longest time. At a later stage, in 2013, the opposition parties formed a coalition known as the University of Botswana Umbrella for Democratic Change (UB-UDC).

As the former South African Statesman described, there are circumstances and challenges that drive us to our limit and which can only be resolved by taking them to the streets. When student activism started in earnest in the 1980s, concentrated at the highest tertiary-level learning institution at the time, the University of Botswana, the demonstrations were peaceful, with little or no violence.

The earliest student protests in the past decade were in 2011 at the University of Botswana and under the leadership of Botswana National Front Youth League (BNFYL) president and comrade (Cde.) Richard Khumoeke. The protests concerned campus issues, but set a pattern that would be repeated often through the years involving conflicts with state law enforcement agencies. At the core of the initial demonstrations, something
which the next two but more violent protests would be hinged upon, were the late accreditation of student monthly allowances, the monopoly of the official book store, and the lack of accreditation of certain courses offered at the University. The outcome of the 2011 protest was the suspension of the student leadership by University management to tighten their grip on power, intimidate the student community and prevent further demonstrations. However, the student leadership was reinstated through a court interdict. The most crucial lesson learnt from this protest was the need for unity amongst the student population, regardless of their political affiliation. The problems that they faced were similar across their political divide. The court ruling indicated that the university did not follow due process in their expulsion of students as they did not have a disciplinary hearing as it is stipulated in the university regulations. Therefore, the university had to reinstate the student leaders.

The second protests to shake up the country were in 2013, also at the University of Botswana, and now under the leadership of Cde. Kago Mokotedi. This was a ripple effect of the University management’s failure to adhere to the demands of the student community in the 2011 demonstrations. The number of students boycotting lectures and attending the demonstrations had continued to grow, something which signaled a sense of urgency among the student community. They realised the need to be part of a larger progressive movement that was to be their mouth piece. The response of management was to tighten their grip on power, intimidate the student community and still to sanction student leadership, while failing to address the causes of the demonstrations. The University would once again lose the court case and had to reinstate the students. The only conclusion that could be deduced here was that the student community had realized the need to unite in their efforts, this was evident in the rising numbers of students who were attending briefs and caucuses during this trying time of student revolution.

The most recent protest, which is still fresh in the minds of the nation, broke out in February 2017 under the slogan #ReMmadikolo (which translates to ‘We are the University of Botswana’). This demonstration is regarded as the ‘mother of all strikes’ for Botswana’s student population. For the first time in the history of student activism in the country, we saw all tertiary institutions standing up in unison to confront their incompetent university management and the Department of Tertiary Education Financing, which is responsible for delivering students’ monthly living allowance and funding.

The capital city, Gaborone, was practically set on fire by the University of Botswana, Botho University, and the Botswana University of Agricultural and Natural Sciences’ students pushed the revolution to its all-time high. There were massive confrontations between the students and state security forces. The authorities resorted to using rubber bullets and tear gas to try and disperse the resilient student masses. When the dust had finally settled, instead of addressing the problems which provoked the students to this show of force, the student leadership was again the prime victims of the classic tactic of ‘divide and rule’ from a dictator’s playbook that the University management prefers. The majority of the student council, including the acting president, Cde. Dikosha Dikosha, the secretary general, Cde. Edwin Ramere, the minister of student affairs, Cde. Mpho Molokwane, and the minister of the bar and canteen, Cde. Ratang Olatotse, were given suspensions of a full academic year. This time around, other student activists at the forefront of the demonstration felt the wrath of University management as well including Cde. Izwalilo Akuje and myself, Cde Resego Kgosidintsi.

I personally felt so much rage inside but I was comforted by the idea that no struggle is ever won without taking risk and enduring a beating from time to time – but most importantly by the possibility of success, that we were on the right side of history, fighting for the rights of our parents, brothers and sisters call in and condemn in the strongest terms our behavior and term it as being disrespectful. They did not see our values and ideas by our elders, teachers and professors. They claim to be the in the know and they occupy positions of power. It’s very disappointing and frustrating when they turn out to be hypocrites, which I think may also be happening here. However, you must tell us what is happening. Maybe students maybe feel betrayed and not once, it happens repeat edly, this is why they go to extremes sometimes. We want growth and improvement but they force us to stagnate. This is a direct result of our conservative culture. As struggle comrades the radio was our closest friend. It pained us the most to listen to the radio and hear some of our parents, brothers and sisters call in and condemn in the strongest terms our behavior and term it as being disrespectful. They did not see the need for us to be protesting as they felt that we were behaving...
like they did not raise us in a respectful and dignified manner. They felt our demands were unfounded as we should be grateful that the government is doing its best to assist us.

**Dominant narratives in student activism**

‘I feel it is necessary for each of us to establish separate identities before we can enter into a relationship of solidarity’ – member of the Japanese student league Zenkyoto

Historically, in almost all forms of activism and the fight for liberation and recognition, there are always those narratives that have a louder voice. Until recently, student activism was chiefly based on the idea of partisan politics and institutional privilege. The divisions of political affiliation and institutional privilege have been too difficult to navigate when the need arose for the student community to collectivise. The view that certain parties and institutions are more important and have a higher social status than others does exist.

For instance, the University of Botswana was regarded as the only institution of higher learning in the country. It always took the leading role. This was evident in the discussions in 2013 surrounding the formation of the body that was to govern all the student representative councils (SRCs) in the country: the Botswana National Union of Students.

It was extremely difficult to mobilise student support on any issue, including student demonstrations aimed at fighting for the liberation of all students, because the most dominant and corrosive narrative was that students only have an interest in what directly benefits them and only in policies that are sanctioned by the party or movement they are affiliated with. That the party or movement in power shapes the student population agenda and the methods to be deployed in dealing with student challenges was pointed out as a problem. One of the main reasons why the student demonstrations of 2011 failed was that they were centralised at the University of Botswana. They did not have a greater impact because they did not include other institutions of higher learning where the same challenges (of late payment of student allowances, the book store monopoly, and insufficient living allowances) were being experienced. There was thus a lack of solidarity.

There is also a dominance of male leaders and a preference for grooming male candidates and politicians, which entrenches gender superiority and widens the gender gap in the political sphere. The students and the general population of Botswana are mostly raised in extremely conservative and patriarchal societies and this plays out in student activism and politics directly. Women in the political environment are reduced to occupy positions that are traditionally regarded as being ‘fit’ for women, like treasurer or administrative secretary. In the history of student leadership at the University of Botswana, the highest political office to be occupied by a female was the post of secretary general, held by Cde Keneilwe Zwebathu of MASS-BNF in 2012.

This subscription to archaic and corrosive narratives has prevented women’s agency in student activism and politics. For the most part, there has been little or no representation in leadership positions in SRCs across the country. The most number of seats occupied by women in these councils is an embarrassing three. This is unacceptably low for a so-called ‘woke generation’.

The words of Zenkyoto, that brave Japanese student, are dear to me, especially as having been one of the few women to be at the nucleus of the revolution. It is something I highlight to my female cadres whenever we converse; that we must also as women establish our separate entities while still part of the greater course as it helps to build that women voice and unite it so that when we enter the...
The tide of oppression that has engulfed us for so long is finally subsiding. Learning institutions, especially in student activism, are beginning to bring down the gender curtain. Women are now standing up and are unapologetic in their fight for the recognition of their rights and in recognising the role of women in politics. For the first time ever, there was a female presidential candidate in the proposed elections. The candidate was myself, Resego Natalie Kgositintsí of the UB-UDC. The elections scheduled for April 2017 were not held due to the student demonstrations which affected the university calendar. University management again went on a witch hunt against the student leadership. I was subsequently suspended for a full year, and the academic year, which concluded on May 2017, ended without the election of a new student governing body. The student community does not have leadership to represent them at present. This was orchestrated by the University to cripple student activism and intimidate current and future student leaders.

I have been involved in student activism since I entered the University in 2013. I was part of the 2013 student demonstrations which protested against insufficient living allowances and the monopoly of the book store. My desire to fight for student liberation saw me taking a leading role the following year when I was elected to the post of minister of information and publicity. During the February 2017 demonstrations, I was the leading student activist. I have suffered at the hands of state law enforcement officers, as I have been whipped and hit with rubber bullets. In one incident, we were running away from the police in pursuit of the Special Support Group from the Princess Marina Hospital, I was hit by a rubber bullet. I fell to the ground and passed out for a couple of seconds until I was woken up by the hooting of oncoming traffic which could have run me over.

The struggle for women’s liberation

“I am not sorry; I wear what I want” – Tshepo Jamillah Moyo

Feminism’s response to political and patriarchal oppression can be summed up in the classic folk tale of the fight between the elephant and the hippopotamus. It is said that the elephant was unstoppable when charging, but the hippo was immovable when it stood its ground. Similarly, the influence of the patriarchy, unstoppable as it seems, must be met with the force of an immovable object through progressive feminism. If needs be, if we have no other choice, we must burn society to the ground for a new more inclusive one to emerge where everyone appreciates the value and might of one another. The understanding of the need for women’s agency is rapidly increasing, especially among generation of woke individuals. We can no longer be bound by obsolete and regressive cultural narratives.

There are male activists who fully support the liberation of women and other marginalized groups in society and seek to dismantle any form of oppression along gender and sexual orientation lines. A close friend of mine, Boemo Delano Phirinyane is one of them, his bio on facebook reads “I was born and raised a conservative but my convictions towards the progression of the human spirit turned me liberal.” This quote sums up his support for women rights.

Counter narratives and the emergence of women’s voices

“We move neither east nor west, we move forward”
– Captain Thomas Sankara

The tide of oppression that has engulfed us for so long is finally subsiding and there is a new wave of strong and progressive activists reshaping the narrative. Women are now standing up and are unapologetic in claiming what they have been so savagely robbed of since the dawn of time – equal opportunities, fairness, and trust that processes and treatment are no longer biased. A new campaign called ‘The Future is Female’ has hit student activism and politics.

Before 2017, there were only ever two female presidents of the SRCs country-wide, Ms. Mmabatho Motsumai of ABM University College, and Ms. Olebogeng Moitoi of Botho University. The ability of these women to bring down the gender curtain has made it possible for other young women to pursue positions such as top leadership positions in tertiary learning institutions.

The success of the movement is thus evident in the successful election of another female president at the Botswana Accountancy College, Cde. Goitseone Maikano. The best part has to be that the quorum of the executive of the council is female. The power of women is being seen in tertiary education, although not yet in the political sphere.

The architect of the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Lenin said, ‘Sometimes history needs a push.’ More women are now recognising the need to be part of the political agenda through activism or by contesting for positions of leadership. Women are thus asserting their position and reshaping history.

The University of Botswana has taken a great stride for women’s rights and in recognising the role of women in politics. For the first time ever, there was a female presidential candidate in the proposed
When it comes to women autonomy I believe it can never be contingent on anything most of all a man, hence I a strong believer in the words of Gloria Steinem when she says “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle” I believe that the struggle for women liberation can and should be pioneered by women as men in most cases have failed us, because helping us means they have to lose the power that the oppressive system gives them. Of course there are those men who genuinely want to help us in our course, and we are grateful for that but they should not dictate to us how we should fight our struggle.

An appalling incident occurred in June 2017 at the Gaborone bus station where a young woman was undressed, sexually assaulted and humiliated by a group of men (The Monitor, 2017). They wanted to dictate to her and other women what they should wear. Shocking as this incident was, the response to it illustrates how young women are standing their ground and reclaiming what is theirs despite such abuse. The #IWeartWhatIWant campaign rose up in resistance. The movement fought against male domination in how women should dress and conduct themselves in public spaces and advocated for women’s self-determination. The movement drew thousands of women country-wide into a conversation about resisting patriarchal dictatorship.

The march started first in Maun on the 27th of May, with hundreds of women marching across the village to claim their bodily autonomy and reject any claim that man thought they had over their bodies. The subsequent weekend of June 3rd the march was held in the capital city, with the dress code being dubbed ‘wear what you want.’ Women were supposed to dress in a way that would make them feel liberated and having total control over their bodies. The march was attended by all women of color, race and sexual orientation. There were also provision for any other ally who supported the course of women wearing what they want.

During the Gaborone demonstration, one of the brave and selfless women who joined, Tshepo Jamillah Moyo, blew the patriarchy wide open when she rocked up with #HoeisLife inscribed on her stomach. The loud voice of patriarchy emerged after her picture circulated on social media and local newspapers.

She later responded to conservative critics in an article entitled ‘I Am Not Sorry’ on the Afrolutionist (Moyo, 2017). The center of her argument was that she had to claim power over the fear that she is made to live in everyday of her life for as long as she has lived as she was quoted saying “Existing in the year 2017 as a young 23-year-old woman I am in a state of constant fear for my life. I am mindful of the routes I walk, the clothes I wear, how I speak every single day of my life. I have to live in a constant fear that any man I walk past could assault me and someone would tell me I deserved it because I looked at him the wrong way. This has been the case for as long as I can remember.”

She also added that as a lesson on from that she realized that all these decisions to be part of the march and wear like she did were not a coincidence, “all these decisions did not happen to me. I made them. They are decisions informed by years of work as a human rights activist.” She argued on her courageous piece of writing.

Lastly was the point that we as women live in a highly judgmental world where our very move is watched and decision questioned. She was informing all other women activist that their life would no longer be theirs as she concluded by saying “I knew my body would be on trial. That I would be shamed for my pants that wouldn’t button up because of my belly being too big, that I would be called a lesbian because of my haircut, I was well aware that my entire life would be on trial. My sexuality, my politics, my identity and even my parents would become a fair target and I must say it took way longer than I expected for the image to go viral so first things first I am not sorry. I am unapologetic and I am not a victim.”

Conclusion

‘An unexamined life is not worth living’
– Socrates

As Socrates had argued, an unexamined life is not worth living. This reflection on what is happening in our reality has helped the students realise the worth and value of student activism and agency. Now that more students realise that the future, their future, is uncertain, they have joined the movement. Young people are rejecting the popular narrative that the Batswana are ‘not confrontational’ as we realise that this has been the reason why we have suffered so much and in silence. The oppression of women, mostly undocumented, continues to pile upon us every day. We are standing up as we realise that we can only count on ourselves as the system has failed to fight for us. We totally reject the idea of men telling us how to fight our battles when they have failed us for so long. Student activism and the agency of women continue to brew the revolution which is being televised and documented, and history will stand to judge how far we have been successful in seeking justice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Resego Kgosisdintsi is a 22 year old black African feminist born and raised in Serowe, Central District Botswana. Kgosisdintsi is the first female president of the Movement Against Student Suppression at the University of Botswana, The young feminist, as she describes herself, was the presidential candidate for the 2017 UBSRC elections until she was suspended from school in May 2017. She is also a co-founder of a women empowerment organisation called Bereka Mosadi Association. She is inspired by Winnie Madikizela and thrives to fight misogyny and patriarchy within the political spaces.
STUDENT ACTIVISM AND YOUTH AGENCY in Botswana

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YOUTH SELF-ORGANISING AND SELF-MOBILISING around Zambia’s 2016 Elections

Namakando Simamuna

In the run-up to the elections, there was growing concern over the young Zambians who fell victim to political manipulation and committed acts of intimidation and violence on behalf of political parties, including hindering rallies of opposition parties, ripping off posters and physical assault that led to a loss of lives. The August 11 2016 Zambian General Elections were held under new constitutional provisions which include legal and electoral reforms, such as the 50 percent plus one threshold to decide on the Presidential Election, which replaces the previous ‘first-past-the-post system’, as well as a presidential ticket that includes a running mate (Kapambwe, 2016).

The youth in Zambia constitute approximately 70 percent of the total population, and they are facing high unemployment rates and an increase in HIV/AIDS infections, among other developmental challenges (CIA, 2017). However, they also represent a major resource for the country’s future development.

Leveraging existing relationships, and emphasising the value of partnerships to bypass obstacles and reach new communities

Through its member organisations, the National Youth Network on Population and Development (NYPD) mobilised various projects aimed at strengthening the youth’s resistance to political manipulation and violence, raising awareness of constitutional rights, and encouraging youths to aspire to leadership positions and exercise their civic right to vote in the general elections. NYPD is a network of youth-led and youth-serving organisations which leverages its well-coordinated structures at the national, provincial and district levels, with support from the Ministry of Youth and Sport. One of the major youth-led campaigns was the Triple V

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Campaign, which had the overall goal of motivating registered voters to step out and vote on 11 August 2016. According to the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ, 2016), over 3.7 million people voted on 11 August 2016 out of the 6.6 million who registered. This translates to a 56 percent voter turnout (ibid), a notable increase of 24 percent compared to the 32 percent voter turnout in the 2015 Presidential By-Election (Siachiwena & Wahman, 2016).

The Triple V Campaign had its official launch on Thursday, 7 April 2016 at the US Embassy in Lusaka. The Triple V ambassador, Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) fellow and musician known as B-flow launched his most recent music album and the project simultaneously at the US Embassy. The US Embassy disseminated the schedule of the Triple V Tour activities on their website and Twitter feed, which amplified the message for the various stakeholders.

There were a few stakeholders that worked with the youth movement. ActionAid embarked on leadership training for youths at higher learning institutions and carried out community sensitisation on the elections. Marie Stopes Zambia, Zambia Youth Platform (ZYP) and the Center for Reproductive Health and Education (CRHE) partnered to emphasise sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as development issues during the 2016 General Elections. The youth and women’s movements in Zambia worked together to train and support young female election candidates for the 2016 General Elections (Mwanakatwe, 2016). The youth movement was also part of the Zambia Election Information Centre (ZEIC, 2016) stakeholders.

Civic education training and voter education

Civic education promotes an understanding of the political system and of one’s own interests, options, rights and obligations. Youth organisations embarked on a nationwide civic education expedition to sensitize young people on their rights and responsibilities. Knowing one’s rights is the first step to participation. Civic education promotes knowledge of civil, human and political rights, but not socioeconomic rights. Participation in civic education programmes is likely to uplift and empower people in that they may feel privileged and excited about the opportunity to participate. They also learn about their rights, responsibilities, the political system and government policies so as to boost their confidence in tackling challenges they and their communities face.

Civic education programmes in Zambia are integrated into various activities, such as sports, as well as in the education curriculum. Sports are indisputably the most popular leisure activities among youths in Zambia. In the lead up to the 2011 Elections, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported the capacity development of national institutions, including civil society organisations (CSOs), in order to strengthen the political process and to target young people specifically. An important step in the right direction was the project to enhance young people’s participation in the democratic and electoral process in Zambia. These activities have enabled young people to become familiar with the issues at stake and their civic responsibilities.

Both exposure to civic education and the level of participation are influenced by the contexts in which people live and their attitudes. Beyond the levels of poverty in Zambia, people’s attitudes are affected by the economic trends which they have seen in the past, and which they expect to characterise the future. The question is whether the economic outlook encourages or discourages participation. It is certain, however, that civic education in Zambia is an uphill battle as a result of increased poverty.

Young Women in Action (YWA) scaled up these civic education initiatives and spearheaded the Triple V Campaign. The main aim was to reduce the high levels of voter apathy in Zambia by targeting 1.5 million new voters, the majority being young people between the ages of 18 and 35. The activities motivated youths to vote in the General Election. The interventions in this campaign included conducting roadshows and interacting with potential voters on social media through Facebook and Twitter chats. B-flow and another well-known Zambian musician, Kantu, took a lead role as campaign ambassadors in sensitising the youth and new voters through roadshows and social media.

Dialogue and conflict resolution

Recognising the challenge of overcoming deeply rooted mistrust between the different political groups, YWA partnered with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) on a Youth Conflict Mitigation Project which worked with peace ambassadors from political parties. The project championed the call for cooperation among political parties and for the youth to tolerate competition and opposition. Dialogue sessions...
were held to provide a platform for adversarial youth to air their grievances safely and discover commonalities.

**Changing the narrative on youth and electoral violence in Zambia**

A major component of the intervention was ‘taking a look at the structural conditions that shape youth experience and provide incentives for violent choices’ (Ojok & Acolb, 2017, p. 96). The ZYP thought it critical to have a holistic conversation about the ‘youth problem’. ZYP took the conversation on the circumstances that force young people to the margins of society and render them vulnerable to political manipulation to different stakeholders through radio programmes on Pan African Radio. This series of dialogues stressed that, for our democracy to grow, the discourse on youth in Zambia must not continue to be ‘dominated by narratives of political violence,’ as Ojok and Acolb (2017, p. 96) point out, which is also the case elsewhere in Africa.

Ojok and Acolb (2017, p. 97) note that ‘Deconstructing youth participation in violence in Africa is incomplete without an engagement with this important phenomenon: not only does it demonstrate the deep-seated crisis of (dis)empowerment facing many societies, it also provides crucial insights into the way youth navigate this complex terrain.’ This also includes active politics in Zambia. The series of discussions on Pan African Radio sought to address what Ojok and Acolb (2017, p. 96) describe as the ‘causal relationship between the emerging role that young people are playing in political violence and broader questions about social decomposition, economic crisis and political underrepresentation.’

Ojok and Acolb (2017, p. 100) further describe the rapid increase of youth unemployment which breeds frustration and is ‘easily translated into violence during election seasons.’ Like other African majority youths, Zambian majority youths are confronted by feelings of having ‘nothing to lose’ and ‘something to gain’ and this encourages them ‘to discount the risk of engaging in electoral violence’ (ibid). The ZYP thus called on political parties to come up with deliberate mechanisms to adopt youths as candidates in elections, despite financial constraints. They also challenged political parties to institutionalise youth participation by coming up with quotas for youth representation.

**Leveraging social media in youth mobilisation and collaboration with music artists as campaign ambassadors**

At no time has new media induced dynamic and fluid political participation like in the 2016 political campaigns in Zambia. Apart from individual social media engagement by youth, youth-led CSOs also found a special niche to use the agility of online engagement to mobilise and engage the majority youth population. Youth-led campaigns took to Twitter and Facebook, the most popular social media platforms, to mobilise and share recent political updates, events and other offline engagements being undertaken. The multiple campaigns on social media led to a spike in registration by young people to vote. ‘Social media has indeed become a perfect medium for untainted political engagement’ (Ojok & Acolb, 2017, p. 104) and contributed to intensifying the electoral participation of youths in a significant way, mostly in urban and peri-urban parts of the country.

The Triple V Campaign created a social media platform for learning and sharing views on the 2016 General Elections and set out on a massive movement, conducting a total of 16 roadshows in five provinces of Zambia with renowned Zambian artists. The roadshows were carried out between 7 April and 5 June 2016, while social media engagement continued to be active until 31 December 2016.

For the Triple V Campaign, social media platforms were used including Facebook and Twitter (@MyVoteZambia). The social media platforms provided timely information regarding the general election, as well as disseminating the Triple V schedule of roadshows and radio and television interviews. The main
information shared on the Triple V platforms enlightened young and new voters on the importance of voting, reminded them to verify their voter’s card details, popularised the polling day, shared content from the Bill of Rights related to the Referendum, and advocated against political violence. Based on the overwhelming feedback from the general public, it was clear that the Triple V social media platforms greatly contributed to the dissemination of appropriate voter education among young and newly registered voters. Over 20 television and radio interviews were undertaken to complement the social media sensitisation activities.

The continued voter education through roadshows during the campaign period was essential in order to provide information to voters as the majority of rural voters did not have access to internet facilities (Triple V social media platforms) and relied on political rallies which are biased towards the political party’s interests in most cases.

It was noted, however, that conducting the roadshows two months prior to the polling day resulted in time constraints in reaching out to voters with a comprehensive package of information. It came to the attention of the campaign team that voters were misinformed by some political parties during the campaign period and urged not to vote in the Referendum. Furthermore, there was inadequate sensitisation countrywide by both the ECZ and other CSOs. In part, this explains why the Referendum failed to get a majority vote.

The youth movement partnered with the ECZ. There was heightened ECZ involvement in the project through Voter Education Facilitators (VEFs) who oriented and trained the Triple V Campaign team on the electoral process and conduct. The campaign team consisted of the DJ, master of ceremonies, social media consultant, print media consultant, YWA members, and artist ambassadors. This enhanced the quality of messages delivered during roadshows, television and radio programmes and social media interactions.

Positioning sexual and reproductive health as a developmental issue in the 2016 General Election

CRHE and Marie Stopes Zambia hosted a series of workshops on why family planning is a developmental issue with aspiring candidates of the 11 August 2016 General Elections in the Ndola, Kitwe, Luanshya, Chipata, Lusaka and Mongu districts of Zambia. These activities were implemented between March and July 2016. The objectives were to enhance politicians’ knowledge of family planning, build their capacity to speak to issues of family planning, and renew their commitment to ensuring access to family planning, especially among young people.

CRHE and Marie Stopes Zambia conducted training with media personnel in the districts to enhance their knowledge of family planning, build media personnel capacity to formulate discussion questions and reporting strategies on family planning, and to build their capacity to effectively engage with 2016 General Elections aspiring candidates on issues around family planning.

ZYP worked with Marie Stopes Zambia and Zambia Medical Association in engaging in post-Referendum SRHR and abortion advocacy by reaching out to electorates (religious leaders, traditional leaders, media, women and youths) on the implications of proposed article 15 to SRHR and abortion in Zambia, and addressing some of the key cultural and religious barriers and stigmas related to abortion among the general population. Zambia’s proposed anti-abortion law related to the article 15 clause ‘life begins at conception’ in the

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Text messaging used to boost youth voter turnout in Zambia

‘Text messaging is a powerful new tool that can be used to reach and harness the voting power of young people’ (Dale & Strauss, 2007, p. 2). A growing number of Zambian youths use mobile technology as their primary means of communication. According to the Zambia ICT Authority, mobile phone users have increased from 2.6 million to 10.9 million in eight years (Lusaka Times, 2016). Political campaigns and voter mobilisation groups in the 2016 General Elections connected with these youth voters. The Triple V Campaign messaging included:

- The statement ‘My Vote, My Voice, My Victory’
- ‘Your Vote is the Solution’
- Audience action expressed as ‘Go Out and Vote’

The messaging also included content on the proposed new Bill of Rights.

Partnership with the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ)

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The more wealthy and well educated one is, the more likely one is to vote and participate in politics as a candidate. Triple V is supporting young female election candidates.

extended Bill of Rights and was the subject of the Referendum during the August 2016 National Election.

**Partnership with the women’s movement**

YWA identified and trained 18 young women who aspired to office in the 2016 General Elections, of which seven were elected as ward councillors. The curriculum for this training included building political leadership; the electoral processes, system and code of conduct; political parties’ ideologies, structures and functions; managing a successful campaign; and communication and conflict management. The process co-opted external facilitators from the Anti-Voter Apathy Project (AVAP) and the Southern African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (SACCORD).

The women’s movement in Zambia, through the Zambia Women’s Lobby and the Non-Governmental Organizations’ Coordinating Council (NGOCC), contributed to this cause by supporting the women with campaign materials such as posters and T-shirts. The NGOCC further conducted community mobilisation and sensitisation for women’s leadership and implored their communities to vote for the women.

The Zambian electoral landscape will never be the same as young voters are now more aware of their rights and responsibilities, and this mobilisation stimulated consciousness which would bring about activism among youths, a critical component to consolidate a nation’s democracy.

Even though the elections have come and gone, the trained youths are still engaged with community members in meaningful ways, ensuring that civic education is delivered, that young men and women understand their rights, and that they are better prepared, enlightened and responsible active citizens. The follow-up and ongoing interventions are providing communities with information and skills to promote peaceful participation in governance. This engagement continues with the goal of addressing the problems outlined by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, p. 13):

> The effect that political efficacy, an individual’s confidence in his or her political knowledge, impacts individual voter turnout must also be considered. This is a critical concept – if voter participation is to increase, political efficacy of voters must increase. Lack of information about the candidates and political issues are cited most often by non-voters as the most important reason for not voting. Indeed, the research shows that the less information individuals have, the less likely they are to participate in the electoral process.

The youth movement intends to ensure the strengthening of learning institutions’ social and political support systems to provide awareness of youths in civic education. This will build civic skills and political efficacy, two orientations that are powerful predictors of political participation in their own right and in detail address the voting pattern and the reluctance among youths to demand political accountability.

One major gap in ensuring a culture of democratic values, political tolerance, support for the rule of law and support for cultural diversity among youths is the lack of well-structured mentorship programmes to ensure a trickle down of knowledge and skills from seasoned politicians to young aspirants. This investment is imperative because youths’ meaningful participation in governance is essential in harnessing the demographic dividend. An expanded electorate to include youths will elect multicultural, gender-balanced leadership.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Namakando Simamuna is a sexual and reproductive health advocate. She is currently the national coordinator at Young Women in Action and is the Vice President of the National Youth Network on Population and Development/AfriYAN, Zambia. Namakando has experience working with organizations including the International Planned Parenthood Federation Africa Regional Office (IPPFAR), and the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (YCSRR). She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Economics and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Population Studies at the University of Zambia. Her areas of interest include; youth leadership, social justice and gender equality and rights.
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In South Africa we see that the need for a post-Matric (Grade 12) tertiary education appears to be far exceeding the provisions made for such education inside the differentiated Higher Education and Training framework as it stands now. Tertiary education is increasingly a commodity for social and economic mobility in Africa, and this links to recent protests and ruptures in popular university life, exemplified by the nationwide #mustfall movements that have brought what has long been “private” university life into the public eye. This has brought the demographics of higher education into public scrutiny.

A good starting point in such a process of scrutiny ought to go back and check the history. The legacies of apartheid are deeply entrenched in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. There are institutions that are historically known to have been for white people (historically white universities or historically advantaged universities) and those that are known to have been for black or, actually, non-white people (historically black universities or historically disadvantaged universities).

A spill-over that has occurred from this legacy in historically white institutions is in the staffing. Representation of the demographic markers of the country is severely skewed in favour of white, older male employees in the higher echelons of employment at the UCKAR.¹

Efforts towards redress: many loopholes?

The White Paper three of 1997 sought to trouble-shoot these historical problems by introducing a systemic change in the ways in which higher education institutions are framed, understood and engaged with. This white paper set out to confront and address the need for redress in the social, political, cultural and demographic norms of institutions of Higher Education in South Africa (South African Department of Education, Department of Education, 1997).

This was approached through the production of a “single, flexible educational system, [that falls] under a single qualification structure” (Odhav, 2009: 38). This system would ostensibly produce a higher education environment with equitable, measurable standards across the board thus facilitating the growth of scholars and thinkers as well as workers, artisans and so forth for a healthy, democratic economy that is fairly and equally representative of the demographic relations and capacity of all demographic groups in the country. The thinking was that this effort would radiate into larger society as the White Paper three was adamant that “Higher education plays a central role in the social, cultural and economic development of modern societies” (Department of Education, 1997: 3).

Twelve years later, when policies leading from White Paper three were being critiqued and challenged, Dr Saleem Badat offered a caveat in the interest of building on the dominant aims of White paper three. He warned that:

Due to political shifts and eruptions on the Rhodes University campus between 2015 and now, the naming of the University after Cecil John Rhodes has come under scrutiny. A popular solution to the issue of the name-change not being moved forward has resulted in the use of the acronym the UCKAR (the University Currently Known as Rhodes) as a way to circumvent this and to indicate a political position of disagreement with the use of Cecil John Rhodes’s name as the name of an institution in Africa.

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Badat’s primary contention is one which warns policymakers that redress cannot be an aim in and of itself. The argument was that the process of redress must run parallel with the process of producing thinkers, scholars, postgraduate students and professors who are equipped to take the reins of the universities going forward when there is socially equitable employment and education opportunities for black and woman scholars. This point is best illustrated in the case of the UCKAR, a historically white university (HWU) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The Eastern Cape is among the poorest and most underdeveloped provinces in the country (Westaway, 2012; Statistics South Africa, 2016; News 24 Archives, 2011). In addition, unlike many historically white institutions, the UCKAR is not positioned in or near a national cosmopolitan hub. It is sustained by the presence of a large number of schools accommodating privileged learners in the area, which function as feeder schools to the university. The presence of these schools, supplemented by apartheid architecture, ensured for many decades that the university was moderately sustainable through apartheid policies hence its historically white make-up.

An Accelerated Development Programme (ADP) was introduced to facilitate the introduction of lecturers and researchers who would not typically have been offered positions in historically white universities (HWUs)... The UCKAR has been at the forefront of this project through its Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL).

By design, the ADP seeks to bring into the academy a new cohort of young academics and, as the name suggests, to “accelerate” their development and competency to be active, efficient, contextually engaged academic citizens. There has been a national move to adopt similar programmes in other Higher Education Institutions such as those reported on by Cloete & Galant (2005). In this article I focus closely on three respondents who are part of the Accelerated Development Programme at the UCKAR and have become “the template” for the national programme for the New/Next Generation of Academic Professionals (NGAP). As part of this programme two externally funded projects functioned as pilot projects for what would later become an institutionally funded project, which then became the template for the national NGAP programmes that are to be rolled out as part of the Department of a Higher Education and Training’s Staffing South African University Framework (Dugmore 2014: 3).

The respondents to my study were Nombulelo Mtshali (MaMtshali), who is in a Humanities department with three other black women academics, two of whom are significantly older than her and outside of the age group of this study. MaMtshali had completed her PhD at the time of being interviewed and was thus outside of the ADP programme per se. The second is Nomathemba Hlongwane (MaHlongwane) who is in a science faculty in which she is one of two black (in the Black Consciousness sense of “non-white”) women academics. Her colleague is older than the age range of this study and is not on the ADP and, as

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2 These statistics are taken from the most recent published Rhodes University Digest of Statistics (Rhodes University (b), 2015) at the time of writing.
3 As Møller pointed out in 2001, these statistics are skewed since they do not account for informal housing and settlement in the ‘township’ areas of ‘...Grahamstown East/Rini, [which is] the area of Grahamstown for which the least accurate population information exists’ (Møller 2001: 1). This is likely to still be the case as informal housing is still abundant in Grahamstown East.
4 I myself am an ADP scholar currently having completed the first part of my contract so I speak in this research from an insider positionality.
5 By this I am suggesting that the externally funded (Kresge and Mellon) Accelerated Development Programmes were models which was used to hone and propose the NGAP
6 Not her real name or surname.
7 Not her real name or surname.
such, does not fall within the confines of this study’s boundaries. MaHlongwane is also the youngest person in her department. The third is Nomalungelo Tshabalala (MaTshabalala) who is also in the science faculty; she is in a department in which she is the youngest academic and one of two black women. Her other colleague who would have been fitting for this study declined to participate.

Young Black women as counter normative members of staff

In the study, I refer to these respondents as “counter-normative” members of staff. By this I highlight that they are outside of the hegemonic understanding of a “knower” in the UCKAR environment. I take this as a position of strength and greater perspective than as a weakness that it is often seen to be. I also like the term “counter-normative” as it keeps in mind that it is an oppositional minority position in a highly normative environment (such as the UCKAR).

There were two overarching trends that I found in the research with these young women. One was the application and use of a metaphorical way to speak about themselves inside the normative environment. For instance, MaMtshali refers to herself as being an “unstructured black woman” in a normative rigid structure, MaHlongwane’s primary metaphor was one of expressing a pervasive feeling of precarity, she expresses this precariousness by saying “...I’m still also struggling to shift, everyone, even the atmosphere is struggling to balance itself. So the whole universe is trying to balance” and MaTshabalala describes the unplanned nature of her arrival as a lecturer in a university as a primary feature of how she views and describes some of the experiences that she spoke to me about. She describes her arrival as “...purely chance...”.

A cursory look at these metaphors gives rise to themes and narratives that I believe to be opening points in the conversations about the retention and recruitment of younger black women staff members at senior academic levels. The reality of all three of these respondents is that no matter how normative or counter-normative they feel themselves to be, they still experience certain aspects of the culture of the institution in ways that do not encourage them to stay for the long-term. The following are the aspects of the institutional experience which are common among all three respondents, and that are also not ameliorated by structures (such as mentoring and reportage to higher structures in the university hierarchy) that are in place in the ADP/NGAP framework.

Dissonance

There is a discursive dissonance in that the women interviewed indicate that academia was not a long-standing life plan, but rather a place in which they found themselves quite “by mistake” (Mthsali 2015), “pure chance” (Tshabalala 2015) or as a result of circumstances, as with MaHlongwane (2015). This notion of having arrived by chance can be both a strength and a weakness. It presents as a strength in the classroom with the experience of understanding that one is modelling a way of being an under-represented or counter-normative teacher identity. This is helpful as a way to have other cultural, social, economic and political examples from which to draw in the making of examples as MaTshabalala points out. Due to the hierarchical nature of academia as a sector, the career of an academic is often seen to be cumulative and is seen as a career-track rather than simply a job. If we use the dominant estimate that there is a “...20-year normal path of becoming a professor after completing a PhD...” (Price 2014) then there is a need to retain PhD-achieving black women candidates 20 years beyond their PhD in order to build a professoriate that is representative of the demographics of the country.

The very notion that black women are under-represented can produce feelings of not belonging and being alien in an environment where (seemingly) everyone who is a “natural citizen” is assumed to have a long-standing plan to arrive at academic work and to build an academic career.

The modelling of being a counter-normative academic can be costly to one’s person psychologically and emotionally. This is expressed in much of the writing and presentation by black women academics whenever institutional culture is discussed. We can see it in the writing by Jagarnath (2015), Idahosa (2014), Mohoto (b) (2015), Mabokela & Green (2001), Mabokela & Magubane (2004), and in accounts in Tabensky and Matthews (2015). There are micro and macro-aggressive experiences that enact symbolic violence upon counter-normative subjects in favour of maintaining the status quo. This suggests that there is a high likelihood that counter-normative academics will not be able to sustain an actively counter-normative identity for very long.

This dissonance between being told that one belongs, such as in the UCKARs motto...
The focus of transformation work should shift from individual “inclusivity” strategies to structural and systemic change; and there is need for transparency and circularity in the feedback system to allow the individual to be influential in the systemic changes that are informed by their experiences.

“A Home for All”, and the experiential rejection of one’s very existence and being in the institution contributes to phenomena such as what is widely referred to as Impostor syndrome, and feelings of being “a spectator” (Hlongwane 2015) or an “unwanted guest” (Magoqwana 2016) in academia.

Precarity

There is also precarity associated with the ADP positions due to the dissonance and the constant feeling of being different. There is some structural precarity due to the contradiction between the mentoring structure’s alleged intentions and its instruments. For instance, there are rigid and entrenched structures of reportage, which are reliant on self-reporting and open communication between mentor and mentee. MaMtshali and MaTsabalala report that mentorship can be a very good way to incorporate and retain counter-normative black women. However, we also see, through the experience of MaHlongwane, that mentorship may have devastating effects if not conducted in such a way as to actively support the independent growth and development of the mentee. MaHlongwane’s shared experiences of teaching under her supervisor may appear to be a helpful in-between step from research to co-teaching with one’s supervisor. However, the presence of one’s supervisor (especially a white male) could have the effect of suggesting that MaHlongwane needs his legitimacy as a knower to justify her presence there since her assigned signifiers do not code her as a knower but as “the known”. This may have the effect of subconsciously confirming to students that the ADP candidate is, in fact, an impostor in need of expert guidance and help in order to do her work of teaching.

Similarly, the presence of less formal spaces such as staff meetings, public gatherings, and classroom encounters in which micro-and macro-aggressive cultural manifestations appear in unstructured ways (Tabensky & Matthews 2015) add to the structural challenges entrenching the dissonance. This is equally true of the lack of circularity or feedback in the reporting structures: the mentor and mentee are constantly reporting, but there is little evidence of feedback on the progress that the institution is making on concerns or issues raised. One of the only channels of response from the university is in the form of media interviews and reports, which suggest that black woman candidates are not only few but (to put it cruelly) are in search of more money, cheaper housing, and employed partners rather than academic careers (Henderson 2016; The Times 2016). These media statements have the effect of confirming the bias against black women as knowers and suggest that they are not motivated by “higher” ideals such as social justice or a quest for knowledge. This bias is underscored most specifically in my study by the participants’ insistence on referring to modelling of under-represented or counter-normative positionalities as a major contributing factor to their retention. Further, they have the effect of absolving the institutions of inertia when it comes to developing tangible strategies for transforming the institutional cultures, as they can blame the departure of black women on factors over which they have little control. This may allow the university to then ignore structural issues that are within their control such as the disparity of salaries between black women and other racial groups, or untransformed policies which make the taking of maternity leave a potentially career-crippling move. Reports to the funders of the ADP then take the form of parading a few ADP candidates while making use of pervasively deficit model language and references (John 2015). The insistence on reporting twice a year, coupled with the lack of active engagement with change, may have the effect of re-inscribing the futility of trying to maintain a counter-normative stance.

This results in a contradiction between the intentions of the mentoring system and its instruments which allow for experience to be far removed from the ways in which the institution views itself and its mechanisms and culture(s).

Burden

The insistence that the ADP lecturer and her mentor report to the institution with no formalised institutionalised and action-based feedback is problematic as a departure point for achieving real institutional cultural transformation.

It seems that the institution has a belief that the mere incorporation of a visibly counter-normative staff member is the extent to which transformation is being addressed, and this would then account for the presence of “Safe bets” (Hlengwa 2015), as well as the presence of those who are visibly counter-normative but are (allegedly) perfectly comfortable within the cultures of the institution (as is the case with Dr Amanda Hlengwa).

Yet, as Njovane, Dass and Donaldson (2015) show, there are those whose experiences of the institution are distinctly unpleasant, uncomfortable and alienating. The points above indicate to me that the weight of the transformation (or transformative work) lies with the ADP lecturer and her mentor (dependent on luck), and is not dispersed within a whole systemic cultural transformation process. This has two clear effects. First, it leaves the individual as an object of transformation so that the mere presence of a counter-normative staff member is immediately taken to mean that the transformation work has been done. This
is contradicted by MaMtshali’s experience of being in a department with visibly counter-normative colleagues who are actually in support of the status quo. It is also belied by MaHlongwane’s experiences of differentiating between certain kinds of black colleagues who she feels understand her experiences of alienation and others who she feels are unlikely to. Second, it allows the systems of academic transformation to claim to be working while the individual buckles under the weight of a resistant system. This is a function of the liberal discourse of “obvious” or allegedly automatic inclusivity and acceptance of difference which produce the “violent politeness” that Njovane (Tabensky & Matthews 2015) describes, referring to the ways in which statements or comments made and actions taken under the guise of politeness can have the effect of being psychologically violent on the counter-normative staff member in a normative environment.

At the very least I believe that there is a need for more research in this area. It is clearly not enough to employ black women in academia. There is a definite imperative to retain them so that we can support the development of a professoriate that includes black woman academics. The ADP (as it stands) presents a programme that is technically enticing but which presents with many emotional, psychological and physical burdens that are placed on an academic who is already likely to be overwhelmed with the accelerated task of becoming an academic citizen. As such, there may be potential danger in the national scaling of these programmes, because while they give the impression of being useful, they reproduce the paradox of dissonance, and have negative effects despite the intentions otherwise.

Two recommendations can be made in this regard: the focus of transformation work should shift from individual “inclusivity” strategies to structural and systemic change; and there is need for transparency and circularity in the feedback system to allow the individual to be influential in the systemic changes that are informed by their experiences.

The reality of the situation as it stands is that, while each ADP/NGAP candidate will have her own strategies of coping, these strategies are really on a spectrum based on how quickly or slowly they lead to fatigue, disappointment and ultimately, moving on, whether to another university or another career. A more focused, disciplined and realistic view of the tools, narratives, methods and effects of the ADP programme on individual participants, departments, universities, and student bodies might lead to a more successful, context-relevant and realistic view of the tools, narratives, methods and effects of the ADP programme on individual participants, departments, universities, and student bodies might lead to a more successful, context-relevant and responsive national scaling, which would increase the retention and success rate of participants in such an endeavour.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lieketso Mohoto (Wa Thaluki) is a lecturer in Drama studies. She is a Sangoma, academic and live sound/voice artist. She is a teacher, a performer and a general performance junkie. She holds an M.Ed (Higher Education) with Distinction from the University Currently known as Rhodes (UCKAR) and pursues creative work in the profession as a live sound-maker and designer (Afrocartography (2013) and Astronautus Afrikanus (2015)), small and large group negotiation facilitator, voice coach, stage manager (Kafka’s Ape (2015) - with Tony Miyambo) and co-maker with Mwenya B. Kabwe. She recently qualified as a practitioner in the Lessac Kinesic work.

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CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT WAYS of creating and consuming knowledge: 
Addressing the absence of young women in the academia in South Africa


This article explores the challenges faced by young Africans in securing decent work, the demographic dividend potential that Africa’s youth represent and the rise of entrepreneurship as a viable choice for young people to ensure their livelihoods.

The article emphasises the potential of entrepreneurship by describing the environment required to nurture micro start-up enterprises and enable them to take those crucial first steps towards success. It looks at the need for hubs to create space for young women, and how incubation in hub spaces can unlock economic value and drive enterprise development on the African continent.

According to the Africa Progress Panel Annual Report (2012), Africa's economies are consistently growing faster than those of almost any other region in the world. However, while many countries are getting richer, the poorest populations in Africa are excluded from benefiting from these gains, with almost half of Africans still living on less than $1.25 a day.

In Zimbabwe, poverty levels have reached an all-time high due to the country’s recent past, with socio-economic and political dynamics now resulting in 80 per cent of the adult population earning less than USD 200 per month (Zimstats 2012). Only 11 per cent of the labour force is formally employed, leaving a large proportion of the working population unemployed or under-employed, with young people being most disadvantaged.

In response to the worsening economic conditions and the alarming unemployment rate, an entrepreneurship ecosystem began to take shape across the continent. Zimbabwe experienced an increase of business development service providers seeking to address the business development needs of entrepreneurs. Organisations like Empretec, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project, was among these organisations.

However their services were tailored to the traditional approach to business, while an entrepreneurial revolution had started. This revolution was characterised by creative innovators redefining an enterprise. With more new-style ventures establishing themselves, there was a clear need for modern enterprise development models to meet their more complex needs. The resulting gap gave rise to innovation hubs and spaces that offered a more holistic support environment for entrepreneurs seeking to catalyse their ventures into commercially viable entities. Stimulus Hub (Zimbabwe) is an example of such innovation hubs.

### The Economic environment

In an economic climate where one needs to innovate and be creative to survive, young people across the African continent are turning to entrepreneurship as a critical source of employment to enable themselves to secure their livelihoods. Plato the 4th Century BCE Greek philosopher surmised in The Republic that necessity is the mother of invention, and this has been evidenced across the African continent in the last decade with the rise of the start-up generation that often finds ways to sustain themselves by solving social problems in their communities.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem naturally developed to support these start-up entrepreneurs who are characterised by their innovative approach to problem-solving yet lack the business skills to commercialise their solutions and develop sustainable enterprises. The majority of education systems across the continent are a key factor in this seemingly blanket inefficiency in fledgling businesses due to their outdated curricula and rigid “textbook” approaches to learning. As most education systems are failing young people, a natural skills void has emerged which in turn
has been filled by innovation hubs that have arisen across the continent. With the increasing change in the composition of the private sector where technology has become a great equaliser for smaller more agile firms and enterprises, there has never been a greater need not only for innovation hubs but also for the critical incubation and training services that these institutions provide to start-up entrepreneurs.

In 2015 the focus on the African entrepreneurial ecosystem culminated with US President, Barrack Obama’s visit to Kenya, one of Africa’s leading entrepreneurship hot spots and innovation hub havens for the Global Entrepreneurship Summit. This event endorsed not only the validity of entrepreneurship as a choice for young people but also highlighted the challenges young people face in achieving their goals and dreams without a supportive environment to nurture them through the early stages of enterprise development.

The Demographic dividend potential

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)’s flagship report, State of World Population (2014) highlighted that the world’s 1.8 billion young people (aged 10-24) of which a large percentage are in developing countries have the potential to revolutionise economies on a country, regional and continental level. To achieve this, they must receive the right type and level of investment in their education, health, human rights and welfare.

The demographic dividend is the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population’s age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15 to 64) is larger than the non-working-age share of the population (14 and younger, and 65 and older. (UNFPA Report 2014)

Innovation hubs play a particularly strategic role in capacitating the youth and creating conducive environments for their enterprises to thrive. The case for investing in innovation hubs and spaces and increasing the number and frequency of their incubation programs that support start-up, micro and small ventures is evident. Canning, Raja, and Yazbeck (2015) highlight a demographic dividend in sub-Saharan Africa that has immense potential to catapult Africa’s development through entrepreneurship. The rise in entrepreneurship, however, raises unanswered questions on gender equity where young women remain disadvantaged in comparison to their young male counterparts.

The entrepreneurial potential of the demographic dividend remains largely untapped, yet it can be a catalyst for increased capacity utilisation in the private sector and drive economic growth and the creation of decent jobs. There is a need for economic policies at country level to be aligned to support the incubation, and further accelerate fledgling enterprises to harness the potential that the demographic dividend represents. A government’s commitment to investing in the economic empowerment of its youth through resource investment, consistent and favourable economic policies, conducive operating environments, an upgrade of school curricula, adoption of technology, supporting the creation of decent work, and strategically creating access to markets is critical for the successful establishment of youth-led enterprises. Innovation hubs have an inherent ability to provide input into policy formulation and enable legislators to understand new and emerging sectors and professions, and therefore would make a strong strategic partner in private sector development.

In an economic climate where one needs to innovate and be creative to survive, young people across the African continent are turning to entrepreneurship as a critical source of employment to enable themselves to secure their livelihoods.

Passion is certainly not lacking in young innovators and creatives across the continent and the socioeconomic challenges the African continent faces provide ample inspiration for problem-solving. A good example is the mobile money revolution. The challenge that African youth face is that they need enterprise capacity development through training services and mentorship to enable them to gain the skills they need to develop high-quality products and services and run professional businesses that can be competitive in the global marketplace. Once that is achieved, the young enterprises have a further need to access investment finance, critical market linkages, and networks that will enable them to grow. Innovation hubs, therefore, present a sustainable solution in the form of structured incubation programmes which are an essential component to the success of young entrepreneurs.
“Innovation hub” is a term that covers a plethora of spaces that come in all shapes and sizes, some seeking specific audiences designed with specific sectors in mind, and others more open to any enterprise that falls into the bracket of “innovative”. These spaces which are made available to start-ups range from pre-incubation, incubation to acceleration. These spaces are described as hubs, labs, co-working spaces, collectives, maker-spaces and more. Regardless of what they are labelled, they are all seeking to address the need for a conducive environment for micro and small enterprises to get much-needed support and grow.

The Innovation Africa Report (African Business Magazine 2015) throws a spotlight on hubs across the continent, analysing their models. “The majority of hubs are best described as pre-incubators or spaces where individuals can meet and bash out ideas for business operations.” This opportunity to have a space to work and meet potential collaborators and learn organically is a firm first step towards the ecosystem needed to support new micro and small ventures needing to find their feet and be professional in conducting their businesses.

Many hubs are sector- or service-focused, from technology hubs to the rising number of creative industries hubs, “green” (sustainability), hubs and the cross-sector hubs that support “innovative” ventures. The World Bank recorded over 117 technology-specific hubs in Africa (World Development Report 2016). BongoHive (Zambia) and MHub (Malawi) are technology hubs while Stimulus Hub (Zimbabwe) is an example of a cross-sector hub which runs an annual incubation programme. Examples of creative hubs include 360 Creative Hub (Nigeria) which is fashion-industry-specific and Moto Republic (Zimbabwe).

Other hubs (for example, co-working spaces) are service-focused, offering work space, exhibition space, or purely office or business services for established small businesses. These co-working spaces are designed to primarily service established small businesses and individual consultants by offering them shared services including shared office space, office management services (including the internet), utility bills, and more. The primary idea behind these centres is reducing overhead costs per enterprise. According to Co-working Africa (coworkingafkafrica.com 2016), Egypt as the co-working spaces capital of Africa has over 76 co-working spaces, with leading spaces like The District servicing entrepreneurs since 2011.

South Africa is not far behind with a plethora of co-working spaces that are sprouting annually across the country. Some leading spaces including J&B Hive, Jozi Hub and Distinct Co-working.

The “collective” model offers a similar service predominantly for the creative industries. These are entrepreneur-led spaces where people collaborate to start urban exhibition galleries and studios or makerspaces outside of the traditional sector systems that are expensive and often difficult to access for young creatives. Collectives have the same effect as co-working spaces, reducing overhead costs and going further by combining revenue for marketing collaborative exhibitions, markets and events, thereby driving down costs. Some good examples of this type of space across Africa include ISU Collective (Zimbabwe), The Nest Collective (Kenya), The Salooni Project (Uganda) and The Art House (Rwanda).

Whatever you call the space, it is apparent that the success rate of micro and small enterprises is dependent on the hub being able to offer (or signpost its residents to) specific and structured incubation programming, business services, and access to SMART finance. If it does not achieve this to some extent, the hub space will fall short of the critical needs of the young people it is designed to serve.
Creating spaces for women entrepreneurs

Slow progress towards the achievement of gender equality and equity severely undermines Africa’s growth potential, from primary school level through to access to markets and opportunities at industry private sector level.

It is important to highlight the need for hubs and spaces that are sensitive to critical gender issues. In response to known gender disparities Stimulus Women’s Network was launched with the support of the Embassy of Sweden in Harare (November 2015), with programmes and packages tailored to women. In 2016 an initiative focused on capacity development (training services), mentorship and market linkages (networks) for women-owned businesses, Choose Women: Buy Local (CWBL), was launched by the Stimulus Women’s Network. The launch of CWBL was in response to the specific needs highlighted by women entrepreneurs within the Stimulus Hub community. The Stimulus Innovation Centre now provides a purpose-designed hub environment for female entrepreneurs to collaborate, learn, and grow their enterprises. The creation of space for women at the centre has attracted other women-focused initiatives to collaborate, learn, and grow their enterprises. The creation of space for women at the centre has attracted other women-focused initiatives who collaborate with Stimulus Hub and Innovation Centre to create distinct spaces for women, including the African Women Filmmakers Hub, an initiative founded by International Images Film Festival (IFF) in 2016.

These initiatives are not unique to Zimbabwe. In Morocco, the Women in Africa Entrepreneurs Hub (WIA Club) specifically supports women in business. South Africa (as a country) was recognised as a hub in the region for female entrepreneurs, with higher numbers of entrepreneurial women in business than its neighbours. South Africa’s entrepreneurial ecosystem received recognition from a global platform, the Dell Women’s Entrepreneur Network Summit (DWEN) when it was chosen to host the 7th DWEN summit in Cape Town in 2016, involving more than 150 women founders from around the world. Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission 2015) also highlights the critical role women need to play in the socio-economic development of the continent, and the importance of their holistic empowerment (education, health, participation, political, social and economic). Africa now needs to move towards implementation of such policies at a far more accelerated rate than is currently taking place to ensure that conducive environments (including innovation and support spaces) are not only available for women, but also supported and to some extent financed by governments as a commitment to ensuring sustainable provision of such services.

Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, launched the revised National Gender Policy (undp.org 2017) in Harare, a document that reinforces and articulates Zimbabwe’s commitment to empowering women and girls. The policy speaks to a commitment to economic equity, as follows:

“The target for economic equity is threefold; i.e. ensuring,
(a) equal participation in economic policy formulation and implementation;
(b) equal access to benefits and opportunities in trade, entrepreneurship and wage employment and
(c) equity and equality in the control of productive resources.” (The National Gender Policy 2017)

The policy is exemplary in its design and provisions, as women can use it to understand and claim their rights. These rights include access to support and spaces that provide them with a greater chance of success in developing their entrepreneurial enterprises, further access to markets and trade opportunities, thereby creating the environment required for success. Commitments to instruments like the Women’s Development Fund (2010) highlighted in the new policy document reinforce a commitment to giving women access to finance to support enterprise development. Female-focused innovation hubs have an opportunity to play an additional role in helping their members in understanding their constitutional rights and identify policies they can rely on when claiming their rights to equal access to enterprise development support, as demonstrated by the work of the Stimulus Choose Women, Buy Local Initiative (Zimbabwe).

The impact of empowering African women on Africa’s development economically and socially must not be underestimated. Aligning practice on the ground with the policies that have been developed at continental, regional and country level could provide the critical catalyst Africa needs to accelerate private sector development, create decent jobs, and significantly reduce poverty. Achieving this will contribute to Africa’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose success is dependent on there being a level playing field with regard to gender, which can only be achieved through the empowerment of women and girls (SDG No. 5).

Achieving the unlocked value of innovation hubs and spaces

The economic and developmental dividends that can be gained from investing in the informal sector (which is primarily represented by youth and women) are significant. The question remains: how Africa can unlock this value?

The starting point is for there to be a conducive operating environment, and this is influenced by the policies that define entrepreneurship at all levels of government. Such policies must be informed by the needs...
of small business, which can be easily identified through engagement with entrepreneurs and innovation hubs. Small and medium-sized enterprise policies focus on a range of interventions to assist existing small and medium businesses, while entrepreneurship policies focus on individual entrepreneurs. Flexibility is critical, particularly in the changing world of work, bringing new and emerging sectors, i.e. green collar jobs and other key factors (Stevenson and Lundström 2002). This leaves a significant gap which needs to be addressed and points to an area for further research.

The World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business program (Doingbusiness.org 2017) currently running in Zimbabwe is going some way to supporting the government who are seeking to address the policy challenges that exist and hinder private sector development. However, more can always be done. For example, an enterprise development policy that recognises the new structure of industry (and the informal sector specifically) is essential. The highest listed African country on the World Bank Ease of Doing Business Economy Ranking is Rwanda at 56, followed by Botswana at 71, then South Africa at 74, highlighting the difficulty young entrepreneurs on the continent face in formalising an enterprise which is critical for economic development at country level.

Beyond policy, there are now other opportunities for the value of innovation hubs and spaces to be realised in Africa. There is a critical need for a two-fold investment approach to developing entrepreneurial endeavours into going concerns:

1. **Investment in innovation hubs and spaces** to ensure that they have the capacity to deliver on their mandate (this includes physical spaces, connectivity and incubation programming, business and other support services);
2. **Investment by providing resources directly to micro and small enterprises (access to smart finance).**

**Direct investment into innovation hubs and spaces**

There are private and not-for-profit innovation hubs across the continent. These centres struggle with the challenge of sustainability as their target beneficiary is typically a young entrepreneur without resources to pay for their services. To address this issue of sustainability and to unlock the value that innovation hubs and spaces offer, there are two possible avenues that a hub manager can explore: corporate investment or private (not-for-profit) investment.

Corporate investment can be a viable source of funding to enable hubs to achieve their mandate. It must be accepted, however, that corporate companies are designed to positively impact their bottom line, so their primary interest is in achieving a return from investing in hubs. We are beginning to see the start of this sort of collaboration or investment through the partnerships between innovation hubs, entrepreneurs and corporate entities. The approach is twofold; either the corporate sponsors the creation of a centre or it invests in an existing hub. Econet Wireless (Private) Limited established Muzinda Tech Hub in Zimbabwe as a pipeline of tech innovator developers for their business. UK-based Justerini & Brooks Ltd (J&B Whisky) funded the start of the J&B Hive in Johannesburg, South Africa, to identify entrepreneurs in the entertainment and creative sectors to participate in their below-the-line marketing strategy. Standard Bank South Africa launched an innovation centre called The Playroom to enable them to better connect with their new entrepreneurial and young clientele.
THE VALUE OF INNOVATION HUBS in Africa

Seed funding is critical for small enterprises seeking to grow. However, grant funding may have an adverse effect if the entrepreneur does not have to practice the discipline of returning borrowed funds.

Where corporate companies partner with an existing hub, the strategy is often to gain information through research or to secure future customers, an example being Old Mutual Properties (Zimbabwe) and B2C Co-working space. Old Mutual Properties provides free workspace and gains information about the workspace needs of this new crop of the informal sector that are dominating the Zimbabwean economy at approximately 80 percent. Overall, the corporate investment model is challenging where the purpose and ethos of the hub and its members are misaligned with the corporate company’s investor strategy. Furthermore, corporates who do not engage beyond providing limited resources do not offer the best value to fledgling enterprises, as they are not invested in their ultimate success.

Private (not-for-profit) investment (also known as “Impact Investment”) is a far more palatable source of investment for existing hubs and entrepreneurs who do not want to be distracted from their core mandate by having to balance the interests of their benefactor with that of their enterprises. This sort of investment can be seen across Africa as part of many multinational corporation’s philanthropic arms’ investments and Africa strategy. An example of this form of investment is the Google for Entrepreneurs Initiative, which partners with Tech-Hubs across the continent and supports them with seed funding and Google services for their members. Other Multinational Corporations like Orange Mobile Network Operator have opted to fund competitions (for example, their Orange Social Venture Prize).

An approach to innovation hub investment that is relatively new and growing is that of the development community investing in hubs to support young people in gaining the skills necessary to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Stimulus Hub (Zimbabwe) has participated in these sorts of investments which are often one of two types:

1. Investing directly in the hub, either the physical space or resources for the centre to attract the right kind of staff and consultants to work with them. An example of this sort of investment is Moto Republic Hub (Zimbabwe), funded in part by a US government innovation grant. Another example is an investment made into the setup of Stimulus Innovation Centre by Dutch-based development organisation, HIVOS, (Humanist Institute for Cooperation) in 2016.
2. Investment into the capacity development of a specific number of entrepreneurs going through an incubation programme. An example of this is the investment the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) has made to enable Stimulus Hub to run its incubator programme for some fully funded scholarships for innovative entrepreneurs (2016-2017). Investing in entrepreneurship is still a new approach for the development community and private funders, but there is potential for it to reduce poverty (particularly among young people and women) through the creation of decent work, access to enterprise, and market opportunities for livelihoods security.

Direct investment into entrepreneurial enterprises

Once an investment has been made, ventures are capacitated and supported, mentored and networked, and ready for acceleration. This is when the second form of investment is required, that of access to smart finance. Seed funding is critical for small enterprises seeking to grow. However, grant funding may have an adverse effect if the entrepreneur does not have to practice the discipline of returning borrowed funds. The incubation process teaches the entrepreneur that they need to work hard to earn and produce a profitable business. Access to smart, not free, finance reinforces this learning.

Smart finance is essentially funds that are made available at below-market interest rates. These funds tend to have more flexible terms of repayment and collateral expectation for enterprises that have been through an incubation process and have reached a certain level or standard of traction in the market, quality of product, and supply chain processes to ensure sustainability. These funds need to be injected into a small enterprise at the point where it needs a capital injection to accelerate growth that will result in a better-quality product and a more consistent production process, increasing market share. These funds are associated with capital investment, primarily equipment for production-focused enterprises.

There are resources available on the African continent for youth entrepreneurship, but these pockets of funding are often directed to an individual entrepreneur who does not have the capacity to understand the contractual terms associated with such funding or the skill to manage those funds correctly. There are some funds (for example, the Tony Elumelu Entrepreneurship Program) which use the model of giving access to finance through a hub that has an incubation programme in place.

The build of resources appears to be concentrated in the African technology sector with African tech start-ups attracting over $185 785 000 in 2015 (Ogidi 2016). However, these investments are targeted at specific countries, “South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Egypt and Tanzania being among the top six countries currently receiving the bulk of these investments” (Ogidi 2016). As a result, many young innovators across the continent still do not have access to smart finance, thereby strengthening the case for incubation programmes in hubs having a revolving fund component in each country. These
funds could be private or corporate in origin, coupled with government funding channelled through innovation hubs which are best placed to identify the most suitable beneficiaries. It is essential to have government participation and funding on a country level for initial seed find for acceleration for the most promising ventures, coupled with capacity support and growth tracking. Government funding is different across the continent, with some countries (including South Africa and Rwanda) seeing higher government investment than others. In 2016 the government of Zimbabwe launched a US$25 million innovation fund that is said to be available for young entrepreneurs and innovators to tap into for growth investment. However, it is too soon to tell the impact this will have on Zimbabwe’s entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Where revolving seed funds are linked to innovation hubs in their capacity as incubators and accelerators, there is an increased chance of the entrepreneur succeeding. Innovation hubs can achieve this transparently and efficiently by setting up a fund management arm to their organisations, audited by reputable auditing firms, i.e., Deloitte, Grant Thornton, Emert and Young and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The funds could have multiple sources or a single source, with possible options being government funding, independent fundraising carried out by the hubs (crowdfunding), development funding (impact investment) or private investment (angel investors). The process for selecting the enterprises that receive funding, coaching and support during the loan period and the transparent, audited system for funds management is a role that incubation programme management teams are best placed to oversee.

**Going forward**

There are needs that innovation hubs are best positioned to meet, making their existence not only of value but critical in the development of fledgling (micro and small) enterprises. For Africa to unlock the full value of innovation hubs, these spaces need to be equipped to provide training, business services, mentorship, access to networks, market linkages, and smart finance to the enterprises that go to them for help.

Innovation hubs have the influence to allow Africa to harness the demographic dividend of its youthful population, enabling them to become primary drivers in creating employment, significantly reducing poverty and change the socio-economic and developmental landscape of the continent with an eye on inclusive growth.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Rudo Nyangulu** is a Zimbabwean lawyer and enterprise development specialist and is passionate about mentoring young people, entrepreneurship and economic empowerment of women and young people in Africa. She founded and currently runs Zimbabwe’s first mixed-sector innovation hub called Stimulus Africa and is a trainer and mentor in its incubation programme. She is also the founder of an initiative called Choose Women: Buy Local that creates market linkages for women-owned enterprises. Rudo is a Mandela Washington Fellow, a founding member of the Innovation Forum Zimbabwe, a photographer and participates in policy advocacy for private sector development.
AFRICA’S YOUTH AND ABUNDANT ARABLE LAND: a potential winning combination

Eugenie WH Maïga

Sub-Saharan Africa has two abundant resources: its youth and agricultural land. With the youngest population globally and the largest share of the world’s arable land, Africa stands to benefit greatly from getting and keeping the youth involved in agriculture (Roxburgh et al., 2010). Africa’s agricultural sector has the lowest productivity in the world (Africa Infrastructure Knowledge Program, n.d.). This contributes to food insecurity and malnutrition on the continent. It is estimated that ten million African youth enter the labour market annually (World Trade Organisation, 2015, p. 3). Many questions arise over how to provide stable employment for them. Asking and interrogating these questions are of the utmost importance.

Young people aged 15 to 24 account for 20 percent (226 million) of the continent’s population (UNFPA, 2014). This age cohort is expected to increase by 42 percent by 2030 – faster than Latin America, Europe and Northern America’s youth population (ibid). This is why the future of Africa is in the hands of the youth. They are one of the greatest assets and a force to reckon with. Improving the productivity and growth of all sectors of Africa’s economy depends largely on the youth. They are dynamic, enthusiastic, resourceful, creative, innovative and adventurous. They come from heterogeneous and highly varied social backgrounds, cultures and traditions. They cannot be ignored if a renaissance of Africa is to be achieved in the 21st century.

How to get the youth involved

With proper planning and well-structured social and economic policy formulation and implementation, Africa’s youth can be mobilised to provide goods and services. Unemployed youths can tend towards unproductive behaviour, they may feel despair and turn to substance abuse, and some to violence and crime. Youth unemployment can contribute towards political stability and revolution, as the Arab Spring and the recent popular uprising in Burkina Faso have demonstrated. Agriculture is one avenue to consider for creating jobs and increasing productivity. These goals are crucial if the continent is to reduce food insecurity. Further opportunities exist along the value chain, from crop production to the processing of raw agricultural produce into food products to the distribution of these to markets. In addition to generating much-needed income and employment, agricultural growth benefits the poorest people the most (Luc C, Demery L & Kuhl, 2011).

Figure 1. Youth aged 15-24 years, by region, 1950-2060.
What’s holding back the youth

Evidence suggests that the youth are leaving agriculture in some African countries (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2016). This underscores the need to demonstrate the profitability and advantages of agriculture as a career to an increasingly better-educated African youth population.

The Africa Agriculture Status Report (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), 2015) highlights the employment challenges brought about by the growing youth population. The reasons behind the youth unemployment crisis include the drudgery embodied by traditional farming, doubts about the economic viability of agriculture, and limited career opportunities in rural areas (ibid). Constraints to youth engaging in agriculture include a lack of access to land, credit, training and ICT. Young women are especially affected. With different roles attributed to men and women in society, young women face greater challenges in making a living out of agriculture. They have less access to land, water, credit as well as new technologies and information. Addressing these constraints is crucial for sustained improvements in agricultural productivity and food security in Africa (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2013).

How entrepreneurship can help

Entrepreneurship is proposed as the main avenue for achieving three most important goals for economic growth in Africa:
- Employment for the youth;
- Food security and sustained production; and
- Inclusive economic expansion with the agricultural sector as the major contributor.

Agriculture can foster social inclusivity by reducing income inequalities across gender, age, and between rural and urban areas. However, success is conditional on the youth having the right skills and access to quality seed, fertiliser and machinery. Other key factors are infrastructure and a conducive policy environment.

Financial inclusion is a big pillar of youth success in entrepreneurship in agriculture. The report (AGRA, 2015) provides several options for improving youth access to finance without requiring fixed collateral. This includes contract farming, leasing, warehouse receipt financing (also discussed by Höllinger, Rutten & Kiriakov, 2009) and factoring.

ICT makes agriculture exciting

Information and communication technologies can help reverse the youth’s negative perceptions towards agriculture and increase its attractiveness. ICT is used for record-keeping (such as in Excel spreadsheets), for providing price information (through SMS), and for creating virtual markets that help link farmers to markets so they can get better prices. They are also used for developing applications for livestock management and crop production and for promoting agriculture among the youth via social platforms. As one female youth explains, ‘ICTs make agriculture interesting and easier; they make getting things done more cost-effective and provide access to needed information’ (AGRA, 2015, p. 127).

The capacity of countries to develop the youth’s skills in the agricultural sector and the
policies being implemented, as part of the Malabo Declaration, are discussed in the Africa Agriculture Status Report. Among other goals, the Malabo Declaration aims at reducing poverty among youths and women and two of the goals clearly target them. The first goal recommends that countries create job opportunities for at least 30% of the rural youth population in agricultural value chains, and the second urges countries to support and facilitate preferential entry and participation for women and youth in gainful and attractive agribusiness opportunities (AGRA, 2015).

The 2015 AGRA report highlights the limitations of the formal training system in terms of access and quality. It suggests opportunities in terms of informal and non-formal training so as to reach more youth, especially in the rural areas. The report reviews continental and national policies that guide interventions for youth involvement in agriculture and other sectors of the economy. Financing and implementing the policies remain the greatest challenges in achieving the policy goals. The report also highlights institutional mechanisms that support youth participation in policy design. Those include national youth councils, ministries of youth affairs and youth enterprise development funds.

The key message is that youths are the backbone of agricultural transformation in Africa. As such, they need to be trained, supported in accessing factors of production, and provided with a conducive policy environment for them to fully achieve their potential.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugenie Maïga is an Associate Professor of Economics at the Université de Koudougou, Burkina Faso where she teaches courses in econometrics, agricultural policy and finance, microeconomics applied to agriculture, farm management and international development. She is a 2017 Africa Early Years Fellow, a World Bank Group program that supports investments in early childhood development. She holds a PhD in applied economics from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and Masters of Science in agricultural economics from Oklahoma State University. This article was first published by The Conversation and is reprinted with their permission.
Introduction

Having a voice and being heard are important elements in what it means to be a citizen. Ideally, a citizen of a nation-state has access to social, economic and political rights in their entirety. Citizenship is also closely linked with participation. People cannot exercise their citizenship when they are not able to voice their concerns. While the practice of citizenship takes place through many direct channels, for example, community meetings, protests, social clubs etc., in our post-modern world, which is spatially disconnected and where people cannot meet face to face often, mediated forms of communication become important spaces, providing opportunities for deliberation, argumentation and participation. It is within the varied media and communication environment that citizenship is shaped and maintained. Therefore, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2006) notion of ‘mediated citizenship’ becomes important in understanding the media’s role in contemporary meanings of citizenship. Mediated citizenship can be defined as the process where citizens’ concerns, desires and aspirations are represented and conveyed by and through communication channels.

Digital technologies (Internet and mobile phones) are changing the dynamics of citizenship, belonging and identity, and impact on practices of ‘being a citizen’. Across the world, digital technologies are being used to create new opportunities for citizen engagement. In Africa especially, these technologies have allowed ordinary citizens and activists to sidestep the often restrictive spaces controlled either by the state or the market. In the past few years, we have seen innovative use of these technologies in mobilisation and the adoption of decentralised, non-hierarchical organisational forms in social movements and NGOs. Although digital technologies have impacted people of all ages, studies have shown that these technologies, especially mobile phones, are particularly vital for young people’s lives and play a large role in their identity formation.
and socialisation (Ito, Matsuda & Okabe, 2005; Notely, 2009). In Africa, youth have taken to digital technologies; especially social media, to articulate their social and political identities (Mare, 2015; Bosch, 2016; Ugor, 2016). Historically marginalised by traditional media, young women specifically, have found ways to perform their gendered identities through digital technologies. In this digital era, the youth are learning and exercising citizenship in fundamentally different ways to previous generations. It is within digital spaces that citizenship is being created, contested and reimagined by the youth on the continent. It is, however, important to remember that access to digital technologies and, therefore, to the possibility of participating in the economic, political and cultural life of the communities they belong to, is not equal for all youth. Rural youths and those living in economically marginalised communities are often digitally excluded.

Youth, participatory citizenship and identity in Africa

Africa is the ‘youngest’ continent. ‘About 65% of the total population of Africa are below the age of 35 years, and over 35% are between the ages of 15 and 35 years’ (AU, 2016). A number of policy instruments recognise this demographic dominance of the youth and their importance (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). The African Youth Charter (AU, 2006, p. 2) identifies young people as ‘partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity of Africa.’ The Charter also outlines youth’s rights and responsibilities, including active citizenship. Citizenship refers to people’s experience of social, cultural and economic inclusion and/or exclusion (arising from differences arising from class, race/ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender and age). Acts of citizenship affect people’s sense of identity, well-being and belonging. While issues such as education, job creation, entrepreneurship and sexual health are major concerns in relation to the youth, citizenship is seen as a precursor to achieving holistic development for the youth.

In existing literature and debates, youth citizenship and identity have been linked mainly to political participation. There is a concern across various countries on the continent that the participation of African youth in key political and economic processes is very low and the youth generally have limited influence in national political institutions. This is more so in terms of the youth in rural areas who have even lower social and political capital and power. This sidelining and marginalisation, in turn, ‘leads to poor representation of the overall interests of youth and to their exclusion from democratic political processes and institutions’ (Supriya, 2016, p. 147). When it comes to elections, youth participation has been decreasing over the years. For instance, data from the UNDP (2013) on youth voter turnout from various countries suggests that young voters tend to participate less in elections compared to older citizens.

Similarly, a 2016 study by AfroBarometer, which surveyed 36 African countries on the political participation of African youth, corresponds with findings from elsewhere in the world and confirms that despite their overwhelming numbers in electoral districts in Africa, they tend to vote less than those in other regions, and their levels of political party affiliation are lower (Wani, 2016). Young women, in particular, were found to be lagging behind their male peers across all the indicators used in the study (see Table 1).

Networked citizens and youth in Africa

The perceived disengagement of African youth from mainstream politics discussed above has been a major concern for policymakers, researchers
and donors alike. Therefore, the social media and other new media applications are seen as potential vehicles to re-engage the youth in political deliberation as these digital technologies are readily associated with young people. The power of social media lies in its power to facilitate interactivity, sharing of uncensored information, creating online movements, and bypassing mainstream media and government restrictions. Since before the Arab Spring in 2011, social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, have been seen as powerful tools for political mobilisation, social action and youth empowerment.

For instance, in Malawi, young people used social media to engineer the 20 July 2011 protest over the deteriorating economic environment (Brooks & Loftus, 2016). In the same country, young women in particular were stripped for wearing trousers and short skirts (Ugor, 2016). Twitter was also used to warn others of volatile areas, and Facebook and YouTube were used to post pictures of wounded protesters and damaged property (ibid). For most youth, social media has replaced traditional media, such as television, radio and newspapers. For instance, in Kenya, research has found that youths are increasingly using social media to express themselves and to debate political issues such as employment, youth empowerment and education. In a 2013 study conducted by Aziz Douai and Anthony Olorunnisola, it was found that 47 percent of young people using social media in Kenya had spoken to a politician through a social network. Youths on social media are more interested in politics and more willing to vote in elections than youth who are not using social media (Douai & Olorunnisola, 2013).

Numerous youth-led political networks and initiatives, such as the Y’En A Marre [Enough is Enough] movement in Senegal, or Mouvement des Sans Voix [The Voiceless] in Burkina Faso, and the ‘Youth Acting For Change’ programme in Mali, Togo, and Burkina Faso, have to some extent employed digital technologies. Y’En A Marre ‘emerged out of young people’s frustrations with the chronic power cuts that plagued Senegal since 2003,’ and became the major critic of President Abdoulaye Wade as he ran for a widely contested third presidential term (Gueye, 2013, p. 22).

Creative participation online: Breaking out of ‘managed’ citizenship

There are multiple and creative ways in which youths are engaging with their realities through online communicative action and practices. Urban youth hip hoppers and bloggers, for instance, are creating their identities and producing lyrics and counter discourses using online platforms to discuss politics and issues that concern them. Spoken Word poets are also using digital technologies. Spoken Word videos on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are being watched by thousands of youths, and most of them contain messages that resonate clearly with the concerns of the youth. This type of communication is fast becoming the go-to form of expression for many young people who cannot connect with the traditional way of ‘doing politics’.

Rights-based models and a concern for youth empowerment and political socialisation characterise current approaches to youth programmes. Youth citizenship in Africa, and indeed elsewhere, is mainly understood in the western liberal sense. The ‘good’ or ‘dutiful’ citizen is, therefore, the one who takes part in political deliberation, votes in elections and is involved in some form of social action. As a result, there are several programmes designed to promote ‘digital inclusion’ intended to connect the youth to different government and educational programmes. This form of managed and regulated citizenship has seen politicians taking to social media to connect with the youth, as has been the case in the recent elections in Uganda (2016), Nigeria (2015), South Africa (2014) and currently in Kenya (2017). Governments and donors are also devising policies and programmes to attract youth into active citizenship. For example, in Kenya, the web-based platform Sauti Mtaani, a Swahili phrase that loosely translates as the ‘voice in the hood’, developed by the Community Education and Empowerment Centre, aims to facilitate civic engagement between youths and the county assembly and their local elected representatives (Avis, 2015, p. 11). Young people are able to send free text messages to their respective county assemblies, making mediated citizenship and involvement for poorer communities much easier (ibid).

In Uganda, UNICEF has created a platform for strengthening communication and dialogue around core development issues through SMS and social media. The platform, uReport, is a mobile phone text-based service allowing youths a chance to share their opinions and experiences on issues that are important to them in their communities and encourage citizen-led development (Avis, 2015, p. 11). Stephen Coleman (2010) calls this ‘managed e-participation’, and he states that projects making use of this process tend to see digital technologies as:

“a way of connecting young people to institutions that govern them; of providing them with experiences of being heard by politicians; of learning about how government and politics works; and of doing so within safe, responsibly-controlled enclaves dedicated to the nurturing of apprentice citizens” (p. 76).

For example, the AU’s African Youth Decade action plan (AU, 2011) acknowledges the need to enable youth empowerment by ensuring youth representation in the formulation,
implementation and monitoring of government development policies. The opposite of managed e-participation, autonomous e-participation, emerges in spaces that cannot be institutionally managed. In these spaces, communication flow tends to be peer-to-peer and nonlinear. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have afforded youths this horizontal form of communication. We see on the continent how the youth, using social media, are breaking out of ‘managed’ citizenship and entering into spaces that promote ‘creative insurgency’.

#ThisFlag in Zimbabwe comes to mind. This youth-led movement, cross-cutting in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, brought the country to a standstill and introduced heated debates, both online and offline, about the political and economic situation in the country. Perhaps a good example of creative insurgency is #FeesMustFall in South Africa. This movement was broadly intersectional and inclusive. Black queer, trans, working class, and women’s voices and bodies were visible and vocal both in the physical spaces of the movement and on social media. Other online campaigns led by young women emerged out of #FeesMustFall. One in particular, the ‘reference list’ campaign (#RUReferenceList) at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, which ‘outed’ alleged rapists linked to the institution on social media, sparked a national debate about rape culture on campuses. Youths are also breaking out of ‘managed’ citizenship through the practice of what John Keane (2009) calls ‘monitory democracy’. This is a form of public scrutiny and monitoring of power mainly enabled by the new digital communication structures. Across the continent, young techno-savvy women and men are using memes, humour and satire to subject the powerful to public monitoring and public contestation.

**Participatory citizenship in the ordinary and everyday practices**

As stated earlier, there is concern that participation levels among the youth, especially among women, appear to be declining and, subsequently, that the African youth are increasingly disempowered. The Afrobarometer 2016 report on political participation states the following:

> Despite AU policies aimed at ensuring gender parity in all member states, young women are even less likely than young men to engage in political activism, particularly... significantly lower levels of interest in public affairs among young female respondents may explain these lower levels of participation. This lack of interest may further indicate socio-cultural or other barriers to their participation (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 24).

Similar sentiments are expressed in a report ‘Youth participation in elections in Africa: An eight-country study’ (2016) commissioned by the Mandela Institute of Development Studies (MINDS). The study found that young women were less likely to participate in civic and political life than young men. While declining civic engagement is a concern, there is a need to recognise that youths participate in civic and political affairs differently and in different spaces. What appears to be a withdrawal of the youth from politics is actually a withdrawal from the traditional political institutions and ways of doing politics. It is in everyday actions, such as blogging, tweeting and online chatting, that political and civic participation is taking place.

Tanja Bosch (2016, p. 221) states that the new biography of citizenship being developed by young people online is ‘characterized by more individualized forms of activism’ and that ‘Twitter affords youth an opportunity to participate in political discussions, as well as discussions of broader socio-political issues of relevance.’ Consider, for example, the Pretoria High School girls’ hair protest that took place in South Africa in 2016. In August 2016, girls from Pretoria High School for Girls voiced their discontent over what they perceive to be systematic racism at the school. The girls took to the streets to protest rules forcing black girls to straighten their Afro hair using hair relaxers. The protest, which was driven by a few girls at the school, moved from the street to online spaces. Young women across the country used the hair protest to discuss hot political issues of race, education, class and social exclusion. The cause was taken over by amandla.mobi,² and their e-petition led to a change in the code of conduct relating to hairstyles across formerly whites-only schools across the country. The issue also led to policy discussions at the government level about racism and discrimination in South African tertiary schools. In Kenya, the miniskirt protest in 2014, driven by young women led to Twitter hashtags #MydressMychoice and #strippingshame which involved discussions around gender-based violence and women’s rights. Deputy President William Ruto entered the debate and reiterated government’s commitment to women’s rights (Fox News, 2014).
Challenges

Although space for young people to bring their concerns into the public sphere through digital technologies may be expanding, the challenges to cyber citizenship are many and often gendered and, in countries such as South Africa, also racialised. Despite their increased presence online, women still remain far behind men as participants and producers of information online. According to Intel’s (2012) report Women and the Web, ‘on average across the developing world, nearly 25 percent fewer women than men have access to the Internet, and the gender gap soars to nearly 45 percent in regions like sub-Saharan Africa’ (p. 10).

Although cyberspace has enabled women to have space, patriarchal forces have used the same cyberspace for censorship and surveillance of women’s sexuality (Association for Progressive Communications, 2013). There are also increasing cases of cyberbullying and hate speech towards women (ibid). Gender violence has been reproduced in the digital world. Youth in rural and marginalised areas, both women and men, also face exclusion from cyberspace. Although research has shown that mobile phone access is almost at 100 percent in most African countries (Pew Research Centre 2015), the digital divide that once existed has now evolved into digital inequality which focuses on the socioeconomic disparities inside the online population.

Conclusion: Reimagining citizenship and identity

Both the AU Agenda 2063 aspirations and the UN Agenda 2030 (Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs) prioritise economic growth and development oriented towards greater social inclusion, participation, poverty reduction, dignity, equality and social justice. These outcomes depend crucially on an active citizenry. The youth are an important group in this configuration. As stated earlier, policies and initiatives on youth development and empowerment view citizenship and participation in a rigid and highly managed way. Youth policies and strategies on the continent should take into consideration the changing nature of youth participation and citizenship. Policymakers should think about how online spaces and popular culture have the potential to rejuvenate citizenship and sustain civic commitment among the youth. We are increasingly seeing that popular culture is playing a huge role in how youths are reimagining citizenship and identity. Dutch media and gender scholar Liesbet van Zoonen, in her 2005 book Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge, argues this point. Shows like Big Brother and Idols have activated youth through online discussion, participation, creativity, interventions, judging and voting: in essence, these are political activities. It would seem that ‘young people’s engagement with pop culture is a gateway to finding their voice and place in the sphere of participatory politics’ (Graeff, 2013). We also see that popular culture is playing a huge role in how youths are reimagining citizenship and identity. Government agencies, foundations, and NGOs that design and operate youth engagement communities online must learn more about young people’s citizenship and communication preferences and how to engage with them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Sarah H Chiumbu is a senior research specialist in the human and social development research programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa. Before joining the HSRC, she spent six years at the University of Witwatersrand where she was a senior lecturer in media and communication studies. She holds a PhD and MA in media studies from the University of Oslo, Norway. Her research interests include media, democracy and citizenship, new and alternative media, policy studies, social movements, African political thought, and decolonial and postcolonial theories.
YOUTH IN AFRICA : Dominant & Counter Narratives

NOTES

Kenya adopted a new Constitution in 2010, which introduced a system of devolution with the aim of broadening representation and preventing future conflict. It established a system of political and administrative counties and a Senate, elected directly by each of the 47 counties (Avis, 2015, p. 11).

Amandla.mobi is an independent, online community advocacy organisation that seeks to build a more just and people-powered South Africa. amandla.mobi members from across South Africa come together at critical moments to take targeted, coordinated and strategic action to make real change (http://www.amandla.mobi/).

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Specify the nation of origin and the reason for the protest.
The number of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects is at the center of a lively discussion that aims to increase the participation of women in Science across Africa. Such discussions may have been kindled by reports that there might be a relationship between how Mathematics is perceived based on gender as shown by a South African study (Mutodi & Ngirande 2014) and a Kenyan study (Kiptum et al. 2013), the low enrollment of female students in Science and Technology degrees at universities as shown by a Kenyan study (Wanyama et al. 2015), and the under-representation of women in Science, Engineering and Technology as shown by a Nigerian study (Raimi et al. 2016).

It is not uncommon for a STEM class in most African institutions to have just a handful of female students. For example, a study conducted at a Kenyan university indicated that less than 30 percent of Science graduates are women (Essner & Hesse 2016). Likewise, Figure 1 shows data from a study that was conducted across nine African universities from 2009 to 2011, showing the average percentages of female students across four disciplines (Bunting et al. 2014). With the exception of the University of Cape Town and the University of Mauritius, all universities recorded percentages below forty. This gender composition is reflected among academic staff members in most departments at African institutions of higher learning. For example, a study conducted in eight African universities showed that female faculty members consisted of at most 25 percent of the total staff members in most of the eight universities (Tettey 2010). It follows that the number of female academics in STEM is equally low, especially those who hold advanced qualifications such as Masters and doctorates.

Despite widespread campaigns for gender equity in higher education, studies show that women are still under-represented in senior leadership in most African universities (Nyoni et al. 2017). Various approaches, organisations, and conferences have been founded to provide platforms for discussions that aim to increase the involvement of women in STEM.

**Figure 1. The average percentage of 2009-2011 female students in Sciences, Business, Education and Social Sciences from nine African universities.** (Data from Bunting et al, 2014)
These discussions bring to light various challenges that affect the participation and advancement of women in STEM. The challenges cited range from domestic pressures where women take on family responsibilities that could keep them from pursuing advanced studies in Science (Essner & Hesse 2016; Okeke et al. 2017), to situational factors such as teachers encouraging male students to excel in Science subjects more than they encourage female students (Akinola & Nosiru 2014). In spite of these challenges, it is important that the conversation moves toward action-based approaches that offer practical solutions towards involving more women in STEM (Olabisi 2014).

Africa should bust the myth that female students do not excel in Science subjects (Makunga 2017). Indeed, various studies have shown that there is no significant difference in performance of male and female students in Science subjects (Joseph et al. 2015). For example, Figure 2 below shows data from a nine-year study (2008-2016) that the author conducted at Kenya Methodist University on the average failure rate in four programming subjects, grouped by gender. The study shows that female students have lower failure rates than male students in three out of four of the programming subjects, with a significant difference in failure rate in the Introduction to Programming course. Thus, even while the discussion centers on overcoming challenges that discourage women’s involvement in STEM subjects, there is positive proof that women are succeeding in STEM subjects and careers.

While it is important to focus the discussion on increasing the participation of women in STEM, it is also important not to forget the contribution of Humanities and Social Science disciplines to STEM.

Recently, a Kenyan Cabinet Secretary for Education expressed the need to allocate more funds to Science training (Kajilwa 2016). However, the focus should first be to increase the resources in all fields, and secondly, to promote interdisciplinary training and innovation across disciplines. For example, Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) is the use of electronic technologies to solve socioeconomic problems and meeting users’ needs (Donner & Toyama 2009). The application of ICT4D innovations can range from innovations that focus on legal systems, such as an e-Judiciary system for safekeeping of judicial information and administration of traditional courts in South Africa (Scott & Thinyane 2013), to innovations that focus on education, such as a mobile application to enhance reading among children in rural Zambia (Ojanen et al. 2015). Thus, it may be more beneficial to train students from various disciplines to work together using Science to solve various social problems that cut across various disciplines. It follows that the discussions on the involvement of women in STEM should include an interdisciplinary approach in order to appreciate the contribution of women from other disciplines.

Growth in involvement of African women in STEM

The data discussed in this article indicates that a lot more needs to be done in order to have more women at the table of STEM learning, innovation and careers. Indeed, over the last few years, Africa has seen a growth in the involvement of women in STEM, brought about by various initiatives and approaches. Such initiatives include the increase in the number of women-focused scholarships and fellowships, women-focused conferences, and women-focused training and mentorship. Below are some particular examples of these initiatives.

Women-focused scholarships and fellowships

The L’Oreal Sub-Saharan Africa fellowship awards grants to women in Science to pursue PhDs and postdoctoral training in various Science fields. Similarly, the Schlumberger Foundation’s Faculty for the Future award supports women, who envision a career in academia, to pursue
PhDs and postdoctoral training in various Science fields. One of the requirements for the application of the Faculty for the Future award is proof that the recipient will contribute to the academic environment in their home country, an important factor that contributes towards filling the gap of female academic staff in African institutions. Support for postgraduate studies is a big contributor to achieving additional expertise in Science subjects because limited funding is one of the challenges that affect the pursuit and completion of studies in most African institutions (Quintana & Calvet 2012; Van de Larr et al. 2016). For example, women in Science in Swaziland cited insufficient access to study funds as a barrier to their career progression (ASSAf 2012).

Google’s Women Techmakers Scholarship3 (formerly Google Anita Borg), provides scholarship and networking opportunities to female students in Computer Science from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Recipients of the scholarship are required to give back to their communities through outreach activities, an approach that ensures that female students in Computer Science share their skills and knowledge with others, thus encouraging the retention of female students in Computer Science.

3 https://www.womentechmakers.com/scholars

Techwomen4, an initiative by the US Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, provides STEM women from Africa, Central and South Asia, and the Middle East, with project-based mentorship. Such mentorship is crucial because it fosters collaborative networks, research engagements, and an exchange of ideas that contributes to the professional development of women in STEM.

Women-focused conferences

AkiraChix5 has organised and hosted an African Women in Technology conference for three years now, with various themes such as “Can Technology Serve?” The conference attracts both students and career women in Computer Science, providing a rich interaction of women in technology. Similarly, the African Women in Technology (AWIT)6 conference, organised by Innova8tiv and Techmoran, is a two-day event with discussions ranging from funding technology start-ups to fashion and technology. AWIT is hosted in a number of other African countries.

These conferences are timely because they provide an opportunity for local students and professionals to be part of a community at home, and not have to travel to international conferences such as the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing (GHC).7 GHC is an annual conference held in the US that now attracts over 15 000 women from all over the world. Students and professionals who attend GHC have rare access to a variety of expertise, companies, and opportunities.

Women-focused mentorship and training

StemKenya8, a UNESCO and the Government of Kenya initiative, is a programme that involves women scientists and engineers who mentor girls in secondary schools on STEM subjects. Comparatively, Technovation, a mentorship-driven competition that offers girls around the world an opportunity to use ICT skills to solve a socioeconomic problem, has seen girls from Africa excel in the competition. For example, this year five high school students from Kisumu Girls High School in Kenya were finalists in the competition after designing a mobile application that addresses victims of female genital mutilation (Nyabundi 2017). In 2015, students from Nigeria emerged

4 https://www.techwomen.org/
5 http://akirachix.com/
6 http://africanwomenintech.com/
7 https://ghc.anitaborg.org/
8 http://www.stemkenya.org/who-we-are
Of importance, is the degree to which mentoring others also motivates me. By holding the ladder up for others, I find that I have to continually learn not only to add to my own pool of knowledge but also share my skills and contribution with others.

As winners of the Technovation challenge for their innovation on managing waste disposal (IKapture 2015).

AkiraChix, a Kenyan center that provides training and mentorship to young girls from poor social and economic backgrounds, involves industry professionals who mentor the trainees. Lastly, Andela®, a renowned center for training software developers, has encouraged the participation of women in software development by having female-only application rounds in both Kenya and Nigeria. These examples show that, with mentorship, African women in STEM can be guided to excel in STEM innovations, and further advance their careers. Studies have shown that mentorship plays a critical role in broadening the participation of under-represented groups in STEM (Okeke et al. 2017; Akinsowon & Osisanwo 2014).

The above examples have illustrated that, even though Africa is still grappling with under-representation of women in STEM fields, strides are being made to fill this gap, with considerable success.

My story

Having enrolled for a degree in Mathematics and Computer Science with little background experience in using computers my first exposure to the consistent use of technology was at university. It is during this time that I discovered my passion for computer programming, nurtured by my innate ability to apply logic to problems. The desire to advance my skills in Computer Science led me to apply for a scholarship and admission to the University of Oxford for an MSc in Computer Science, where I had to work doubly hard in order to bring myself to the required standards for the Master’s degree. One of the biggest lessons that I learned while pursuing the Master’s degree was the need to prepare our African students for the world – a lesson that I carry to my mentorship programmes to date.

I enrolled for a PhD in Computer Science at the University of Cape Town (UCT) under the able supervision and mentorship of Professors Edwin Blake and Hussein Suleman of the department of Computer Science, ICT4D Research Laboratory. My research focused on developing design strategies that enable novice students of programming to learn Java programming on their mobile phones. During the four-year period, I was involved in various mentorship and training initiatives such as acting as a lead-trainer on digital skills to first-year students, to participating as a founding member of a Women in Computer Science society™, that focused on providing mentorship to female students in the department. In 2014 I was one of the winners of the Google Anita Borg scholarship (now Women Techmakers Scholarship), an opportunity that further ignited my interest in mentoring others. With this interest, I led a five-member team in a year-long outreach programme towards mentoring girls and women in Technology. In 2015, I was one of the fellows selected for Schlumberger’s Faculty for the Future award, an opportunity that fuelled my interest in academia. Upon completing the PhD, I returned to Kenya as an academic member at Kenya Methodist University in the Computer Science department. As the earlier statistics in this article indicate, the composition of full-time academic staff in the department is two female lecturers to seven male lecturers. Within the department, I am the only female academic staff with a PhD.

Recognising the gap in students’ experience with skills such as professional development, scholarship application, and innovation, I founded a mentorship programme that targets Computer Science university students. With 83 per cent of the 35 students who first joined the programme indicating that they had never been in any mentorship programme, there was a gap that needed addressing. Six months from the start of the mentorship programme, 92 per cent of the students indicated that they had gained from various professional development workshops that targeted skills such as professional writing and presentation. Some of the mentees participated as peer-trainers, where they taught programming skills to other students, with 100 per cent of student trainees highly rating the peer training sessions. Figure 3 shows over 30 students during the second phase of the mentorship programme. These students are from nine universities in Kenya, 47 per cent of whom are female. The female mentees have demonstrated increased confidence in themselves and in their prospects within Computer Science, since joining the programme. Since its inception, the mentorship programme has attracted more than five industry partners, an International Women’s Day award10, and a grant from Anita Borg’s Syster’s Pass-It-On award.11 I was also recently selected as a 2017 TechWomen Emerging leader, an opportunity that will further strengthen my mentorship skills. I currently work with a mentorship partner in the programme, Krystal Musyoki, who has mentorship experience from UCT and also Greenhorn mentorship at the University of Nairobi.

The research journey that was started at UCT has been integral in inspiring my advocacy for quality research and education in Kenyan universities. In 2015, I presented a paper at the Grace Hopper

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9 https://andela.com/join

10 http://wcs.cs.uct.ac.za/


12 https://anitaborg.org/profiles/pio-award-recipients/chao-m/
Conference on the importance of increased research in African institutions of higher learning (Mbogo 2016). Consequently, I am continuing my doctoral research towards providing students with a mobile- and tablet-based application that they could use to learn Java programming. The approach of using mobile devices to support the learning of practical subjects, such as computer programming, has been underexplored in developing countries, although such devices provide an opportunity to fill the skills gap found in practical subjects due to resource constraints (Roux 2016).

My journey in learning and working in STEM has been a combination of passion, mentorship and support that I receive from others, and the desire to use my skills to contribute towards solving a societal problem. Of importance, is the degree to which mentoring others also motivates me. By holding the ladder up for others, I find that I have to continually learn not only to add to my own pool of knowledge but also share my skills and contribution with others.

Conclusion

The number of African women in STEM is undoubtedly still low in most of the Science fields in comparison to the number of African men in the same field. Yet, the involvement of more women in STEM would potentially result in more innovations that contribute towards societal and economic development, including innovations that specifically target women. For example, women’s health provides myriads of opportunities for women to innovate solutions. Women’s participation in product development for women-based problems would increase their success in the application (Kaul 2016). In addition, the training of women in STEM contributes to the knowledge pool, which will further propel African economies towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Women in STEM can act as much-needed role models to other women. Fortunately, the continent is seeing an increase in participation of African women in STEM. However, in order for the stories of African women in STEM to be heard, we need to raise our voices through publishing our stories, sharing our experiences in conferences, showcasing our innovations, and taking the initiative to mentor others. It may not be enough for women STEM to operate in a silo; they need to work with women and men from other fields in order to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects that would have an impact in their communities.

Recent reports on sexual harassment of women in STEM have exposed yet another ugly challenge, with statistics indicating that 60 per cent of female respondents in a US study have experienced unwanted sexual advances in the workplace (Gedye 2017). This means that even while we initiate mentorship programmes and institutions for girls, an honest conversation needs to be had on workplace harassment, and the internal legal frameworks that would support the prosecution of culprits without victimisation of those affected.

For the foreseeable future, the intensity of encouraging women in STEM cannot wane, and as new challenges emerge, physical resources, human resource, legal structures, and mentorship support have to be considered as one unit if women are to thrive in learning, innovating and working in STEM.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Chao Mbogo graduated with a Ph.D. in Computer Science from the University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on supporting learners from resource-constrained environments to learn to program on their mobile phones. Dr. Chao holds an MSc in Computer Science from the University of Oxford and a BSc in Mathematics and Computer Science from Kenya Methodist University. She has received a number of recognitions for her academic achievements and her contribution to research and mentorship. She was recently recognized as one of 2017 Quartz Africa Innovators. She was also selected as one of 2017 G20 Young Global Changers.

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THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY OFFER young women in Africa: My life story


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Technology is growing rapidly in Africa and transforming the way people gather, share and receive information. It is also fast changing how young people perceive and address various problems by providing opportunities for them to innovate and create new technological solutions to challenges that directly affect them and their communities, resulting in a breed of young people who are highly aware of their ability to be active change agents and influencers using ICTs.

The advent of ICTs is fast disrupting some of the long-existing narratives that have kept young people closed off from primary influential spaces and transforming how the youth can participate in shaping policy and practice, while providing them with spaces for alternative narratives and experiences on politics, economics, governance, development and civic engagement, among other things. Van Rensburg (2012, p. 7), in a study of South Africa, Kenya and Zambia on using the Internet for democracy, states: “The changing nature of communication ushered in by the dawn of new electronic communications has changed the nature of political interaction profoundly; it adds that the advent of ICTs and especially the internet and mobile phones, which are platforms for new media, has added a new, global dimension to the operations of modern day democracies.”

Irungu, Mbugua and Muia (2015, p. 6) also note that, “The use of ICTs provide the required information to enable youth to make objective choices on profitable enterprises, their niche markets, modern technology and model success stories. While technology is broad, comes in many forms, and can be applied in several ways, one model that has stood out in recent times is that of technology hubs or start-up incubators, as they are known. A technology hub is a facility which incubates and supports young entrepreneurs who have the potential to be great innovators. It equips them with knowledge, practical skills and finances to enable them to create viable solutions to existing social and economic problems in society. These incubator hubs help young people who have great ideas by providing them with technical know-how, a workspace, mentors and facilities for turning their ideas into sustainable businesses and companies, as well as assisting them with targeted market research and links to potential investors who can provide them with start-up capital.

As young Zambian and Malawian women, we are proud to be part of a community of practice comprised of individuals at such a facility which is called mHub. mHub is a technology incubator founded by Rachel Sibande. While mHub is based in Lilongwe, Malawi, the community undertakes technology-led projects which extend to other African countries. mHub was started in 2013 and, over the years, has focused on creating a safe, creative and innovative space which presents opportunities for young people in Malawi and Southern Africa to innovate and apply their creative skills to contribute to the social, cultural, political and economic narratives of their countries. The mHub model is intended to create such a space specifically for young women and girls by deliberately designing initiatives to enhance their digital skills and amplify their voices.

Women continue to be forced into stereotypes and encounter a variety of barriers that perpetuate a negative portrayal of their gender in society which assume that men are better suited to roles in technology innovation and other science-related sectors. Women’s voices have been absent in many public spheres, creating a situation where there is unequal participation and representation purely on the basis of their gender.
According to Ziman (2013, p.1), there is a deeply ingrained idea in our society that men are the movers and shakers in the business world. They are the CEO’s, the CFO’s and the ones who make things happen. This may have been true fifty years ago, but today we are seeing a new and very interesting trend developing. Women are making great strides in the business world and the ratio of men to women is beginning to even out. While the participation of women in the workforce and the level of their education are increasing, there are some major factors that are holding women back more than men (ibid). These factors, among others, contribute to the enormous wage gap and overall gender inequality that has developed in the modern workplace (ibid).

As young women, we have had to deal with stereotypes and portrayals in society that reinforce gender inequalities, especially in professional spaces. We have worked in environments where we often experienced a deliberate undermining of our ability to contribute to tasks and work solely on the basis of knowledge, skills and capabilities. We have been perceived as being weaker, less intelligent and, therefore, needing favours, connections and the approval of male counterparts in order to be relevant in our domains of technology and media respectively.

For this narrative to change, spaces and initiatives that are deliberately women-focused and practical will always be necessary. This is the motivation behind the establishment of a Girls’ Coding Club initiative within the hub. Through the girls’ club, we create a comfortable and conducive space for young girls to learn digital skills, such as developing games, animations, and web and mobile applications. So far, the hub has trained over 730 girls in digital and social entrepreneurship skills. The young women have also had the chance to hear motivational and career talks from established and accomplished women in science, engineering, technology and mathematics fields.

Two great success stories from our Girls’ Coding Club initiative are that of Shreya Thakrar and Rebecca Mzungu, who joined mHub in 2015. They have nurtured their skills in web and mobile application development. Rebecca progressed from being a student to becoming a tutor on web app development for other girls. Recently, the young ladies got a place in a prestigious inaugural global robotics competition to take place in Washington DC. This robotics competition seeks to engage over 160 nationals from more than 100 countries around the world in developing technology solutions that solve social problems. Shreya and Rebecca have been building a robot to enhance access to safe water. Through our other initiative, the Children’s Coding Club, over 1 000 children have been trained with skills to develop games and animations in a quest to create a generation of creators of technology, rather than simply consumers of technology. Panashe Jere, a 10-year-old boy and member of our Children’s Coding Club, developed a mobile application that teaches children how to speak and keep them company when they are alone. The app converts input text into speech so children always have someone to talk to. The application is called ‘Talk to Me’ and, for his innovation, Panashe won a national competition on app development organised by Facebook, TNM and mHub, and a trip to Silicon Valley, USA, to meet Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook.

Apart from enhancing digital skills among children, girls and the youth, mHub has been championing the development of local technology solutions aimed at creating awareness and action on issues of human rights, service delivery and enhancement of citizen engagement during electoral processes.

Women in ICT championing human rights

Ufulu Wanga is an evidence-based ICT-led human rights tracking tool coordinated by an all-female team in collaboration with mHub. Ufulu Wanga, in Malawi’s Chichewa language, means ‘my rights’. The platform was developed in response to the need for Malawian citizens, especially women and girls, to gain in-depth knowledge of their human rights, as well as to report all human rights violation cases on a secure platform. Cases of human rights violations are reported via SMS or using a web form. Ufulu Wanga offers anonymity so that details of the victims can be protected while their cases are escalated on to the relevant authorities and stakeholders for action.

The Ufulu Wanga platform was piloted in Mtandire in Lilongwe, Malawi. Mtandire has a high-density urban population, but the majority of the inhabitants live in poverty and crimes against women, such as rape, are rampant. Awareness campaigns were conducted to sensitise citizens on their rights, the existence of the ICT tool, and how they could make use of it to report cases of gender-based violence, rape, violence against persons with albinism, child abuse, child marriages, and any other violation of human rights. According to Alice Mlotha, the chairperson of the Community Human Rights Watch group in Mtandire, Ufulu Wanga is a viable solution to some of the challenges that girls, women and the community at large are facing. The tracking tool is
helping curb human rights violations, increasing the reporting rate, and ensuring citizens are informed about their fundamental rights. Mlotha stated: “Previously, women had been facing challenges such as mobility and fear to report in person or in public community fora on human rights abuses and violations. With Ufulu Wanga, citizens are now able to report via SMS remotely without the need for physical interaction. The reports are forwarded to responsible authorities such as the police, Victim Support Unit and the Malawi Human Rights Commission by our friends at mHub in real time.”

Ufulu Wanga has thus created a powerful platform for the young women at mHub who are passionate advocates of gender equality and equity. They are at the forefront of community development, influencing strategies, regulations and norms that affect women and girls directly. The dedicated all-female team treats reports and cases with the urgency they deserve to ensure that victims have support and recourse to seek justice. The Ufulu Wanga team themselves understand the gender dynamics in their community, and they well know what it means to be a woman in a highly patriarchal African society. These young women have positioned themselves as leaders in creating a sustainable information society which prioritises women-focused content using an ICT-based platform as a mediator between marginalised groups, service providers and law enforcement.

**ICT for citizen engagement**

Obasi and Lekorwe (2014, p. 2) note that ‘Decentralization for active citizen participation has become one of the greatest challenges facing governments in this twenty-first century.’ Driven by documented evidence that there is often very minimal engagement between citizens, their elected leaders and utility service providers, as stated by Obasi and Lekorwe (2014, p. 1): ‘Public policy making in many African countries has long been dominated by a ‘top-down approach’ which is a hangover from either the long period of military dictatorship in many of the countries or from the authoritarian one-party system in some of them. Many existing participatory mechanisms only provide symbolic forms of participation’. Such realities compelled mHub to further develop two knowledge portal platforms to facilitate effective participation of citizens in public affairs. One is called Election Situation Room for Southern Africa (ESRSA), and the other is Mzinda, which means ‘My City’ in Malawian Chichewa. Through these platforms, citizens, especially the youth, can send reports via SMS and the web on problems related to elections and essential utilities, such as water, electricity and waste collection, in their local area. The reports are then forwarded to key stakeholders and institutions including election management bodies, security agencies, city councils and utility service providers for responsive action in the affected area.

**ICT for elections monitoring**

The dynamic team of young people who coordinate the ESRSA project has developed a knowledge portal and put together technological tools that provide information and teach skills on how to use technology and ICT tools to monitor and observe elections and to enhance credibility, transparency, fairness and inclusion during electoral processes in Southern Africa. Using a model called the Election Situation Room (ESR), we bring together several electoral stakeholders, including electoral management bodies, security agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), media and citizens to collaborate and monitor different aspects of an electoral process using ICT-based tools.
Our project builds on the successful use of technology as a tool for citizen engagement during elections in Malawi, Tanzania and, most recently, Zambia, and is supported by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). We initially worked on the project as the ICT consultant and online media lead for the pilot projects in Malawi and Zambia. Together, we set up several ICT-based tools that were used to gather and share information during these general elections. In Malawi, the e-voting platform was called the Malawi Elections Information Centre (MEIC) and, in Zambia, it was called the Zambia Elections Information Centre (ZEIC).

Using basic technology tools, such as SMS, web forms and social media, citizens, the majority of whom were young people, were able to engage and report on events as they happened throughout the electoral process. Such reports facilitated real-time response from mandated institutions, such as the police, anti-corruption commissions and electoral commissions, among others. We used social media as a means of amplifying the citizens’ voices, views and opinions on how the electoral process was unfolding. Critical data was also verified by trusted sources, correspondents and media on the ground, before escalating it to the relevant authorities. Through these initiatives, we quickly realised that ICT tools could efficiently complement traditional methods of monitoring elections through the collection of reports from observers and ordinary citizens in real time.

Over three months in the run-up to the elections, we were able to collect very valuable information and produce reports that highlight indicators of whether the electoral processes were being conducted in a free, transparent and fair manner. Every week, we highlighted issues that citizens presented to us as most pressing, including violence, women’s participation, and asset declaration, among others.

One of the key issues that emerged, specifically in the 2016 Zambian General Election, was the low participation of women in running for office due to sabotage by their male counterparts at the political party level (ZEIC, 2016, p. 29). Fewer women were adopted to contest at the parliamentary level in the 2016 elections, only 87 women across all contesting political parties participated as opposed to the 138 who had run for office in 2011 – a 37 percent decrease (p. 23).

The citizen’s reports also highlighted how some of the women who decided to run for office in the 2016 Zambian elections were disadvantaged by corruption within political party structures. It was reported that adoption committees at various levels were soliciting bribes (ZEIC, 2016, p. 25). In some instances, women were dropped in favour of a male candidate or abandoned the process due to a massive hike in the nomination fees (p. 28). Others, especially those from rural areas, could not travel to verify their education qualifications in person, a mandatory yet cumbersome and costly requirement which was not decentralised and could only be conducted in the capital city (ibid).

Such reports were key for advocacy organisations that influence policy. The data will be used in lobbying for deliberate policies and structures that create a level playing field and opportunities for women to contest public office.

At the helm of developing such innovative technology and media platforms for social and political change is a group of young people, led by the authors as young women professionals. Such technology initiatives have placed ordinary citizens at the centre and amplified their voices on political issues that affect them in the electoral process. ICTs reshaped the nature and structure of the public sphere, broadened information-gathering networks, and enhanced people’s participation in shaping political discourse.

**ICT for service delivery**

In Malawi, public service providers, such as the Lilongwe Water Board, Blantyre Water Board and city councils, are actively using the Mzinda platform developed by mHub to enable citizens to send reports on the status of essential services delivery such as water, electricity, sanitation and waste collection in their respective areas, through SMS, web forms, a mobile application, Facebook and Twitter. Reports are categorised and sent to various service providers on a central web portal. Service providers, such as water boards, city councils and the electricity supply commission of Malawi, have responded by dedicating personnel within their structures to respond to the reports and take necessary action. The platform tracks issues that have been resolved or are outstanding, and service providers are rated according to their level of responsiveness. Such ratings serve as an incentive to service providers to be responsive and take action.

Publicity of the initiative is conducted through community campaigns in hotspots such as trading centres and residential areas, and through a weekly radio programme. Such complementary mechanisms are crucial in enhancing the traction of ICT-led platforms as the existence of technology alone is not a solution to problems. It requires stakeholder participation.

Priscilla Mateyu, the Public Relations Officer for Blantyre Water Board, has described the Mzinda platform as a vital supplement to their citizen fault-reporting initiatives, and a useful tool to assist the Water Board in getting reports on issues such as water leakages. Real-time data helps the service provider take action and ensure there is minimal loss of revenue, while promoting enhanced customer satisfaction. The Mzinda platform has also made it practical for citizens to engage with their elected officials, such as ward councillors and members of the local community.
parliament directly, and to track what response or action they take to address the issues raised by the electorate. Councillor for the Masasa ward in Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Yona Mkandawire said, ‘The platform is a welcome development as we have been able to receive specific reports and take action, such as the construction of a foot bridge at Chideso after citizens submitted reports of the affected area being impassable through the Mzinda platform in November 2016.’

This growing use of ICT for citizen engagement is bound to enable efficient implementation of plans to extend the services to other districts in Malawi and, possibly, to other countries with a context and scope of social, technical, economic, cultural and political issues similar to Malawi and Zambia.

**Conclusion**

On the growing digital landscape, it is important to foster a culture of practical responsiveness towards Africa’s young people by building their capacity to actualise talents, skills and potential in leading and addressing social issues using ICTs. While technology itself is thought to be neutral, it is important to recognise and address the gender imbalances that exist in the environments where technology is developed and utilised by deliberately making the sector more accessible to women and increasing their opportunities to become prominent. It is important to look at all components of technology through a gendered perspective because the use of technology is still in many ways affected by the dominant cultural narratives of the communities where it is being introduced.

As young women, we are committed to enhancing digital skills for children, girls and youths to create a generation that can transcend from consumers of technology to creators of technology; from job seekers to job creators. We are committed to streamlining public service delivery and communication using ICTs and creating avenues for more young people to take up careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. We are here to challenge the norms and create the new norm — that girls, women and the youth can freely take up roles in developing innovative technology solutions that solve social challenges.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Rachel Chavula-Sibande is the founder of Malawi’s first technology hub, mHub, an incubator for technology start-ups with a special focus on building young technology entrepreneurs through training, skills development and mentorship. Rachel is an alumna of Former US President Barack Obama’s Young African Leaders Initiative and a recipient of the 2015 Tech-Women Scholarship Programme for outstanding computer science students from Google. She is also the Next Einstein Forum ambassador for Malawi, an initiative which promotes science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Rachel was named one of Africa’s 30 most promising entrepreneurs under the age 30 in 2016 by Forbes Magazine.

Martha Chilongoshi is a Zambian journalist and proactive advocate of women’s rights working to influence the functioning of society through consistent dissemination of information on governance, human rights and gender equality using online platforms. She is currently a project manager at Mhub Malawi – leading a team of young people in coordinating the Election Situation Room for Southern Africa (ESRSA).

**NOTES**

1. www.mhubmw.com
2. These are no mere assumptions about the treatment of women in ICT. There is recent evidence showing that women in ICT are marginalised, even in so-called developed nations. For example, this year, Google has become the centre of a court case on gender discrimination in their remuneration schemes (women are reportedly paid a quarter to a third less than men for the same job) (Do, 2017), as well as a heated debate on women’s ‘place’ in technology innovation and their treatment by male colleagues (Levin, 2017a; Bergen & Huet, 2017). Numerous female ex-Google employees have come forward describing discriminatory treatment. Some describe experiences of being ‘invisible’ to their male colleagues and deciding to quit working for the tech giant (Levin, 2017b). These feelings of hopelessness of ever making a contribution or progressing in their career are akin to those felt by many others, including the Malawian women running for political office in 2016. It is alarming that, in one of the most technologically developed companies in the world, divisive racial prejudice is still combined with gender discrimination, further marginalising women of colour (Levin, 2017b). ICT, even as a science, is thus not yet permitted to be a fully neutral or safe space for women. However, individuals from within Google and other ex-employees have stepped up and given serious attention to the problem, countering the discriminatory narrative with evidence. A powerful argument is made by Megan Smith, Obama’s CTO during his term in office and an ex-Google employee herself. She acknowledges that the discrimination exists and is played out in what she calls ‘death by a thousand paper cuts’. She cautions that it poses a threat to the industry. Smith describes how it is being overcome by a greater majority who embrace diversity (see an encouraging interview with her.
EXPLORING NEW NARRATIVES, creative spaces and opportunities for youth and young women in Southern Africa

3. www.ufuluwanga.com
5. www.mzindawanga.com

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Africa has witnessed an overwhelming increase in religious fundamentalism, and there may be a link with this and the rate at which development has gone down, and living conditions plummeted. In Southern and East Africa, where Christianity is the most followed religion, at 82 percent and 66 percent respectively, there has been an increase in charismatic and Protestant Christian churches (The Association of Religion Data Archives – ARDA, 2012). These churches, together with the already existing apostolic and conventional churches, have contributed to the rise in religious fundamentalism which is known as ‘the strategic manipulation of religion by particular State and/or non-State actors to gain or retain power and control and limit rights’ (AWID, 2015, p. 1). In West and North Africa, the Muslim religion is the largest followed (51 percent and 89 percent respectively) (The Association of Religion Data Archives – ARDA, 2012) and has increased its hold with the insurgence of extremist groups purporting to represent youths’ interests.

In most African countries where there is a dearth of good governance and accountability, the result has been kleptocratic and lifetime presidents — the biggest stumbling block for economic, social and political growth and contributing to the negative youth culture across the continent. Theft of resources and autocratic leadership have forced youths into destructive activities (Williams, 2012). In Southern and East Africa, some youths are participating in politics to survive as they get paid to unleash violence on political opposition party members (Derman and Kaarhus, 2013, p.25) and also, in the process, sell their vote cheaply (Chinhamo, Newsday, 26 August 2017). Brittan, Lewin and Norris (2013) in their journal ‘You Must Know Where you Come from’ confirm the relevance of religion in dealing with economic, social and political changes. Those not engaged in political thuggery resort to religious beliefs to deal with the physical and emotional stress emanating from their circumstances. Millions of youths, women and children have joined Protestant churches led by self-appointed ‘prophets’ and ‘apostles’ who sell the ‘miracle’ gospel. Individuals give their little, but hard-earned income to these millionaire ‘prophets’ and ‘apostles’, believing that the envisaged miracles will be a panacea. These churches have contributed to negative outcomes among the youth.

Christian religion and youths

The effects of self-appointed prophets and apostles on women

Some youths have become self-appointed pastors, prophets or apostles. In various circumstances, young men team up with mature male church leaders from other denominations to mislead thousands of congregants who bring in cash in the form of offerings, tithes and ‘first fruits’, among other types of giving. In packaging their messages to attract money from congregants, they manipulate the gospel, emphasising that if the congregants do not give, God will never listen to them. (Marongwe, 2015, p.13-14).

As people get more desperate, ‘men of the cloth’ dupe them into believing that they are not praying, fasting or giving enough. In religious groups, such as apostolic sects, women and girls have been exposed to beatings, emotional violence and ejection from marriages, inter alia, after so-called prophets accuse them of witchcraft or cheating on their husbands. Girls in such sects are forced into early marriages. Religious beliefs and traditional practices, as well as poor medical facilities, contribute to women’s limited access to health facilities and exposure to diseases and
churches are allowed to preach, and women are appointed to lead—churches tell a different story. Women and men in some conventional the patriarchal makeup, power hunger and chauvinism in these new it is expected that the new Protestant church is a place of progress, and they do not have access to health care and thus become outcasts. (Girls Not Brides, 12 June 2013).

Centralisation of power and abuse of women in the new church

Unlike the conventional, mainline churches led by governance boards, where the amount of money received during church services is announced and openly accounted for, the wealthy self-appointed pastors and prophets do not account to the congregation. Money from tithes and offerings is largely personalised, and control revolves around the founder’s family. It is quite common for the children of the founding members be called pastors, deacons or deaconesses without their undergoing theological training. The general practice is that money received from the congregants is privatised by these religious leaders who use it as they please while increasing their power and influence. (Heuser, 2016).

Women often fill up the church pews, do the hard work and give the most, however, in most cases, they do not occupy positions of power, and they are not part of the decision making. They are also barred from preaching. The executive boards of such religious groups, if they exist, are often filled with men handpicked by the leader, with the few women on such boards being the founder’s wife and children. While

One Zimbabwean pastor, Robert Martin Gumbura, is currently incarcerated under a 40-year sentence for raping women and children. In 2014, his rape and sexual abuse crimes in his church came to light. He manipulated, raped and sexually abused women and girls, despite having 11 wives of his own (The Herald, 3 February 2014). Two more self-appointed prophets, Walter Magaya, a youth founder of PHD Ministries, and Emmanual Makandiwa, founder of United Family International Church (UFIC), are popular for supposedly being able to conduct ‘miracles’, but they are both embroiled in scandals. Makandiwa is currently before the courts as he has been accused by a former donor of mistrust, manipulation and fraud, among other crimes (The Sunday Mail, 11 June 2017). Audio clips of Magaya have been leaked on the Internet which expose his sexual relationships with congregants, extramarital affairs, manipulation of young women whom he paid tuition fees for in order to sexually abuse them, and embezzlement of church funds. (New Zimbabwe, 23 August 2016)

‘Prophet’ Lethebo Rabalago of Mount Zion General Assembly in Limpopo, South Africa shocked the nation after he sprayed his congregants with Doom, a pesticide, purportedly for healing. The Limpopo Health Department took the pastor to court (Herald Live, 21 March 2017). In 2014, Daniel Lesego allegedly prayed for a bottle of petrol and claimed it had a ‘pineapple taste’ before serving it to his congregants. An image posted on the Internet shows a young female drinking a petrol-like substance while the pastor holds the bottle (Sowetan Live, 19 November 2015). Women and girls are often at the receiving end of these miracles and this can expose them to reproductive health vulnerabilities.

South Africa-based Pentecostal church leader Shepherd Bushiri was asked to get a visa to enter Botswana by the government, in its quest to clamp down on unscrupulous self-made prophets. As a Malawi national Bushiri would not ordinarily need a visa to enter Botswana (The Nation, 4 May 2017). Authorities in Zimbabwe are seeking to monitor and regulate churches more closely, especially considering the level of abuse of women (Newsday, 15 July 2014). The Zimbabwe Government exposed an apostolic sect in a Harare suburb called Budiriro in 2014 which barred children from attending school and viciously controlled women’s movements. The leader, wanted for questioning, is still on the run (The Herald Online, 6 May 2014).

In preparing brides for their marriages, the doctrine of submission, which is largely preached at weddings or during a woman’s bridal shower when she’s preparing for her marriage, emphasises that women must be under the control of their husband. The same Biblical scripture goes on to tell men to love their wives in a manner that requires men to invest in deeper submission. This scripture is never fully discussed for young couples, and the role and responsibilities of men are ignored. This has been for centuries an often-quoted scripture used to oppress women in marriage. Women are over-prepared for submission in

These new churches have become spaces for political abuse. Many of the young founding pastors are aligned with politicians in a quest to gain more power and wealth.

it is expected that the new Protestant church is a place of progress, the patriarchal makeup, power hunger and chauvinism in these new churches tell a different story. Women and men in some conventional churches are allowed to preach, and women are appointed to leadership positions (Hom, 2015, p. 6). This treatment of women in these new churches has a negative effect on leadership role modelling for young women in many areas of their lives.
Human Rights programmes reach out to Apostolic Sects and raise awareness on child marriage and young women’s issues. Activists from Tag a Life International (TaLI) and SaFAIDS record a television programme wearing gowns in order to identify with the women of this sect.

marriage through various religious platforms, while young men are encouraged in machismo and sexism that promote abuse of women. A few churches that attempt to address these skewed marital issues between women and men often fall short on how to articulate equality. Others simply encourage women to be strong and ‘conquer the devil’ by persevering in abusive marriages.

The erosion of work ethic, and the ‘miracle’ gospel

In Southern Africa, the rate of unemployment has ballooned with countries such as Zimbabwe reportedly having more than 95 per cent informal employment rate, a direct sign of a depleted economy (Worstal, 2017). The post-Apartheid South African situation is such that many women and men cannot sustain their existence in the labour market, with men believed to have only increased by 10 per cent between 1993 and 2008, women are said to have increased by 38 percent. Inequalities are still felt by women who are seen leaving employment to marry, provide care for sick relatives or due to other problems. (Leibbrandt et al. 2017, p.7).

The lack of formal education and job opportunities for youths in Africa tends to stifle work ethic, negates living standards and limits development progress as the continent struggles to maximise the demographic dividend. On the other hand, young men have recognised ‘alternative’ career opportunities and the easy money that can be made by starting their own churches. The dwindling economies and closure of industries in Southern Africa (Njaya, 2015) mean that many young people lack a sound work ethic, proper training while the belief that overnight miracles can save them seems to be growing. Unscrupulous individuals become self-appointed religious leaders making easy money from gullible or desperate individuals through fake miracles and false promises of wealth and success. The miracle gospel, variously known as the prosperity gospel, has superseded everything, including the dignity of work among the youth.

Politics and prophecies

These new churches have become spaces for political abuse. Many of the young founding pastors are aligned with politicians in a quest to gain more power and wealth (The Herald, 5 January 2015). This partnership for the exploitation of the masses is sadly very effective for politicians who seek popularity, votes and larger numbers of supporters. This has worked in opposition to development in that the pastors support lifetime, autocratic and abusive political leaders, falsely linking the latter to divine plans and misleading congregants. Politicians then largely turn a blind eye to abuses by these churchmen in return for the favour.

The desperation for miracles and competitiveness of the new churches

There is stiff competition among the young church leaders themselves to draw the most number of congregants and a recently popularised statement has become, ‘If you want to make money, start a church or a political party.’ Young prophets make outrageous claims and also compete in their performance of ‘miracles’, which may not merely be fake, but place people’s lives in danger and are being used to defraud them as seen in the miracle of ‘Doom’ and ‘Petrol’ above.

The ways in which the new church leaders interact with the congregants is exploitative, especially for women. In the churches, women are portrayed as being in desperate need of healing, and their problems are overemphasised in relation to the prospect of ‘miracles’ which can be bought. They have become easy targets for all forms of abuse, particularly when they are manipulated into believing that the prophets can solve their problems. In some instances, they are told that they can experience ‘healing’ through sexual abuse perpetrated on them by these ‘prophets’ (Press Reader, 20 July 2017). The situation is sufficiently serious and widespread that regional bodies such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU) should act urgently.
Islam extremism and the youth

The largest African extremist Somalia-based group is al-Shabaab, directly translated ‘the youths’. Al-Shabaab is responsible for the Kenyan West Gate Mall bombing on 21 September 2013 in which over 60 people died (Howden, 2013). The same group went on to attack again, killing nearly 150 and injuring 79 university students at the Garissa University in Kenya on 2 April 2015, specifically targeting Christians. The attackers are believed to be Muslim terrorists who were protesting the large number of Christian students at Garissa University (Stuff, 7 April 2015). The surviving youths blamed the Kenyan Government for failing to respect their lives and not prioritising their security amid reports that there had been warning signs of the impending attack days before it occurred (Time World, 4 April 2015). The Garissa fundamentalist attack was also to indicate anger at young women who had been earlier threatened with stripping for wearing miniskirts.

Ladan (2006) notes that religious fundamentalist actions by extremist groups in the name of Allah are against the four chief values of the Quran: ʿadl (justice), ihsan (benevolence), rahmah (compassion), and hikmah (wisdom). These qualities stipulated in the Quran are the fundamentals of human rights. The killing of people and oppression of women are the opposite of benevolence, compassion, justice and wisdom.

Since women are not involved in the translation and research of the Quran, its interpretation continues to be at the will of men, who base this on their own desires and for their own benefit. Women’s bodies and lives are portrayed as the symbols of moral society. They are the bearers of society’s morals, and they have the obligation of raising the next generation (Ladan, 2006). Ladan argues that there is a relationship between the Quran’s core provisions, the Islamic perspective on gender equality and justice in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance and abortion, among others, and women’s rights, as provided by the Protocol on Women’s Rights in Africa. He argues that the Quran if applied well, supports the rights of women (ibid).

However, violent attacks reveal extremist interpretations of the religion which are hegemonic and disrespectful of women’s rights. Their actions call into question the validity of their faith in a religion which is based on doctrines of respect for life, justice, and protection of the rights of the vulnerable. Other Muslims have refuted the extremism and asserted that it is not a representation of their true faith. For example, in June 2017, after the ISIS terrorist attack on London Bridge, women stood on the bridge declaring that they were more united with those seeking peace, speaking against terrorist attacks by the Muslim extremists, instead advocating for tolerance among religions and standing with victims of the attack. (Independent, 26 March 2017)

The desperate control of women’s bodies and dress and the killing of defenceless young students are cowardice on the part of Muslim extremist groups and violations of the principles of the Quran.

Research has shown that individuals join extremist groups, such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and ISIS, among others, because of ‘social marginalization, political exclusion, lack of access to justice or resources, and repression or abuse by state and security services’ in the affected countries and communities (Lindborg, 2016). It is clear that many of the young people who join these groups are looking for meaning in life and have grievances because of marginalisation which the authorities and other stakeholders in their communities have failed to address (UNDP, 2015). Political exclusion because of Africa’s dictatorial lifetime presidents, corruption, bad governance, failed economies, tribalism, poor justice systems that ignore the plight of the poor, as well as kleptocracy, state capture, and abuse of national resources by leaders and their families often drive young people to fundamentalism (Cooke & Downie, 2015). There has been a great rise in suicide bombings by youths, including by young women. When youths take part in such activities, they destroy lives and they cut their own short. Many youths have been forced into the religion, while others have volunteered to join the extremist groups.

The Boko Haram abduction and forced marriages off of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 left the world shaken and triggered the campaign #BringBackOurGirls. The campaign attracted significant support, including the then first lady of the US, Michelle Obama, and is one clear example of how misguided and criminal extremists use women’s bodies and lives as a battle field (Prism Vol 6, 1 March 2016). In pushing for the creation of an Islamic state to be governed by Sharia law which heavily controls women, denies citizens participation in voting and any such public life, and forbids ‘Western’ education, they continue causing havoc in Nigeria and neighboring countries. (Human Rights Watch, 11 April 2016).
Islam, as a religion, is highly patriarchal in nature, regarding women as subject to men and some words in the Quran even depict the birth of a girl child as a harbinger of gloom (Al-Manteeqi, 2016). Women are expected to cover their entire body except for the eyes in public. They are not allowed to hold leadership positions or to air their opinions in families and communities. Girls and young women endure forced and early marriages. This takes away their right to complete their education, to mature as young self-determinant and intelligent beings, and to self-actualise. It robs them of their right to choose their own partner, and their own voice in a marriage, particularly regarding sex, and the right to contraceptives and protection from sexually transmitted diseases, including the deadly HIV plague.

Conclusion and recommendations

Protocols such as the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, the African Youth Charter, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provide for the rights of women and youths in Africa. They promote and enable a progressive youth culture and the advancement of their rights, including sexual rights. Poor governance, a lack of accountability on the leaders’ part, and human rights abuses expose African youths to insurmountable difficulties and many resort to joining extremist groups, engaging in sex work, and other unsafe and exploitative measures. Many do not have any choice and are thrown into child and forced marriages in which they are constantly abused, and they endure female genital cutting, combined with poor health care and education. Many African youths are affected by the unavailability of jobs, poor infrastructure and un conducive environment, while other youths across the world advance through technology. Youths would resist joining extremist groups such as Boko Haram, and question their ideology and behaviour; they would recognise religious leaders’ hypocrisy and abuse, and reject directions to eat grass and be literally trampled underfoot to receive healing (Rozani, 2015); they would stop killing one another in xenophobic attacks (in South Africa) (Gomo, 2010); they would take part in advancing the development of Africa – if their environments were conducive (AU, 2015).

In their 50-year vision for Africa, African leaders outlined Africa’s aspirations for an ideal continent which is termed Agenda 2063. The sixth one talks about ‘An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children’ (AU, 2015, p. 8). The third speaks to ‘An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law’ (AU, 2015, p. 5). These frameworks recognise the human rights of women and youths. However, what we see in religious fundamentalism are the rights of youths and women undermined and violated. Religious fundamentalism growth triggers a backlash on women’s rights; governments and international bodies should commit to and act on the promises of women’s rights.

African Union should be firm on accountability, governance, human rights and hold their member countries accountable to ensure implementation. Governments should invest in the security and protection of children and youths in Schools. Women’s Human Rights must take centre stage in national budgets and implementation. Most African countries have strong constitutions and laws that protect women, it is high time they show political will in implementation. African Bodies such as African Union (AU), regional bodies such as Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and The Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), East African Community (EAC) should all walk the talk and ensure the delivery of sustainable development for Africa through delivering on their strategic plans, conventions, treaties and agreements.
For the African countries, expenditure should be reduced on war-targeted security and increase spending on community development, human rights protection and increased accountability. Infrastructure development, technological advancement, democracy, girls’ education, women’s health, education and women’s political participation should be advanced and invested in each African country.

Finally religious groups and all possible structures and systems should be checked and monitored according to constitutional provisions of freedom of association but most importantly according to the human rights and human dignity provisions of the Human Rights Conventions and treaties such as the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Maputo Protocol among others. Internationally human rights bodies such as United Nations should insist on holding member countries accountable to women’s rights, ensuring countries deliver on their commitments to the United Nations.

Sentiments in this article consist of the observation of the writer as a Christian woman, a human rights practitioner working in the Zimbabwean and African societies with her girls and young women’s rights organisation Tag a Life International (TaLI), as well as reference to writings of others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe is a human rights activist, specialising on girls, young women and youth issues. She is the founding director of Tag a Life International Trust (TaLI) in Zimbabwe. She has served in various boards, including Community Solutions Alumni Programme by US State Department. Nyaradzo is a member of local and international networks, a Reagan Fassell Alumini, and is also a Vital Voices alumni. She is a multiple award winner for human rights work and music. She’s contributed articles on women’s rights, gender and development to prestigious local and international newspapers, journals and blogs.

NOTE

1. See http://isisnotinmynname.com

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ACCESS TO AND USE OF PUBLIC SPACES

Tsitsi Fungurani

Introduction

This paper analyses how the rural/urban variant determines how young women experience, access and use public spaces. It will look into how this variant shapes their narratives. The analysis can also be extrapolated to the youth in general. The paper uses Shortall’s (2013) lens of rural and urban as space, place and location where social relations are constructed and deconstructed. The paper also discusses the concept of ‘public’, noting that the experiences of women in public and private spaces are different. Several socio-cultural and economic factors influence and affect young women’s access and use of public spaces. For example, young women may be cautioned not to walk on their own after dark for fear of possible physical and sexual harassment, mainly from men. Young women may also be encouraged to dress ‘decently’ when they go into public spaces or else they may be seen as having no morals. Young men, on the other hand, are not often, if ever, cautioned in this way. Public spaces are, therefore, associated with violence and notions of negative masculinities played out towards women. As society tries to protect women from the adversities of the public space, negative gender stereotypes of women as ‘weak’ and needing protection and men as lacking self-control and ‘wild’ are entrenched. Despite this, young women themselves are not a homogenous group. Race, economic status and level of education are some of the factors that differentiate young women’s experiences.

The importance of the rural and urban story

By 2030, the world will be measuring its development milestones against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA, 2015), Africa is projected to see the largest relative increase in the size of its population over the coming 15 years with a median projection of 1.68 billion people in 2030. It is also the region with the ‘largest projected relative growth in the number of youth, with the number aged 15-24 years expected to increase by 44 per cent between 2015 and 2030’ (ibid, p. 21). To keep the discussion in perspective, let us refer to today’s 12-year-old, who will be 25 years old by 2030. The challenges the 11-year-old faces today and the opportunities that are currently available will shape Africa’s 25-year-old in 2030. Therefore, we can predict whether Africa’s 25-year-old will tell a progressively different narrative to the 25-year-old of today. It will not be rocket science or guess work. The UN SDGs are anchored on the promise that no one will be left behind. Therefore, it is important to look at the rural young woman’s story, give recommendations for what needs to change, be enhanced or eradicated for her not to be left behind in the development discourse and for her story to be different in 2030.

Interrogating public spaces

The introduction above already begins to show that there would be commonalities in the stories of rural and urban young women. A clear story begins to emerge: the marginalisation of young women from the arena where activities affecting everyone’s lives take place. This means that other population subsectors, such as men and older women, make decisions on behalf of young women. If young women are ‘sanctioned’ in accessing public spaces, it means that someone else is telling their story on their behalf. This has never been the best way to tell a story.

According to UNESCO (2017), ‘A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of
gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level.’ It also considers the virtual as a new type of public space. The notion that public space is accessible to all is an ideal, but the reality is starkly different, especially for young women.

The economic space

The public is the space where most socio-economic activities take place. There is a clear link between access to public space and the socio-economic status of young women. Several factors limit young women’s access to economic spaces. The lack of capital and technological infrastructure excludes young people, especially young women, from conversations about mega investment projects. Those who are entrepreneurial are pushed into the informal sector. While this sector could be the largest source of employment in countries with high unemployment, the players operate in a very hostile environment. The policies that regulate this sector are often inadequate and contradictory, making some informal operations illegal. Njaya (2015, p. 97) purports that, in the ‘Zimbabwe Agenda for Social and Sustainable Economic Transformation, 2013-2018, the government expected the informal sector to create employment and spur economic growth and development,’ yet the police harass vendors and informal traders, at times taking their goods, and adequate space is not provided for the informal traders to operate. This is because there is no law or policy guiding small and medium enterprises and supporting the blueprint. It is a sorry sight considering that unemployment in Zimbabwe is extremely high. More data is needed to be certain, but unemployment has been estimated to be between 65 percent and 95 percent (Chiumia, 2014). However quantified, let it not detract from the seriousness of the problem. University graduates opt to sell airtime on the streets because they cannot find employment, as evidenced in the #ThisGown social media reports (Hodgkinson, 2016). The situation is even worse for rural youths. The lack of investment in the rural areas means that there is little disposable income to boost the rural economy. Economic opportunities for anyone, let alone the youth, are very few. This scenario is not unique to Zimbabwe. Similar scenarios play out in most African urban centres.

The socio-political space

Political parties are known for luring the youth, both in rural and urban areas, when election time approaches. They leverage the vulnerability of the youth with promises of a better life after the election, and they also ‘buy’ elections with meagre provisions such as seed, fertilisers, airtime and food parcels. Unemployed youths are used as campaigning agents and promised jobs and other benefits once the party is in power. Clashes, which can lead to injuries or even death, happen between supporters of rival parties. Promises are often never fulfilled, and the masses are soon forgotten after the elections are over, only to be remembered when the next election approaches.

The youth space becomes rife with political manipulation to gain a majority. This means that the youth, both rural and urban, have the power to make or break anyone’s political office aspirations. Civic education should be geared towards awakening the youth’s political consciousness to this power. It is important that voters hold political office bearers to account to fulfil the promises they make during electioneering. Active political participation should not end with casting a vote, which is important, but also making sure that services are delivered in fulfilment of constitutional provisions. With the advantage of numbers, the youth should make political leaders aware that if they fail to deliver, they will be removed from office. Currently, the majority of the youths are disengaged from voting because they do not see the benefit of this exercise for the reasons stated above. There is general agreement now that the youth are

Envision a 25-year-old rural young woman in 2030 who is technologically perceptive and feels safe and confident in accessing and making use of resources. She would be able to access markets to sell her goods and participate in how she and her family benefit.
not future but current leaders. Therefore, in addition to young people contesting for political office and being voted into power, by holding office bearers to account they are also exhibiting leadership.

**Rural youth**

Since gaining independence in Africa, there have been major strides in investing in the lives of rural populations. There has been a major drive to build clinics and health centres. African governments implemented policies around inclusive primary education, striving to make it accessible to those who could not afford it. However, when economic structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) were introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, government spending in public service provision was severely cut. Subsidies in public service delivery are what African communities needed to boost them towards equity. SAPs snapped away this chance. Even when SAPs ended, the quality of life for many working class families had immensely regressed and, in some families, this regression has not stopped, generational poverty continues to plague them (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001).

Today, besides policies that state that primary education is free, in practice, schools are permitted to levy additional fees, such as building funds and student activity fees (The World Bank: 2009). Without strict guidelines, these extra fees can become even more than the school fees. Schools also send away children whose fees have not been paid. Besides embarrassing the child, who has no control over the payment of their school fees, the practice is a major violation of children’s rights. The cost of education becomes an inhibitor to accessing education, especially in poor regions such as the rural areas.

Due to persisting negative patriarchal attitudes and values, many young girls are kept out of school when parents choose to send their boy children to school at the expense of girl children (Robertson et al: 2017). Other factors, such as the long distances to school which make the journey to school unsafe, the expectation that girls should carry out huge amounts of household work before and after school, and a lack of sanitary ware, keep young women out of school and ultimately limit their access to the opportunities that completing school opens up (Chaluda 2016).

A scourge that haunts sub-Saharan Africa is the high rate of child marriages (UN Statistics Division (UNSD), 2017). Much of this abuse happens in the rural areas under the guise of upholding custom and tradition, but at the expense of the rights of young women. Such customs rob young women and girls of any chance of becoming independent women with power and autonomy over their bodies and choices in terms of economic production and distribution. UN target 5.3, to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations to achieve gender equality, is commendable (UNSD, 2017). Governments should be held accountable with serious penalties charged against office bearers who fail to commit and meet this target. I argue that, with political will, change and transformation are inevitable.

**The urban young**

The lack of opportunities in the rural areas drives young people out of the rural areas towards urban centres. UN-DESA (2015, p. 51) predicts that ‘all of the future growth of the world’s population is expected to take place in cities.’ Currently, African cities are struggling with high rates of urban poverty; this will certainly get worse if policy and resources are not channelled towards making cities sustainable. Many young people migrate to cities, only to realise that the bright lights of better education, employment and income that lured them remain a far-off dream. In addition to the lack of financial capital, young people soon realise that they lack the social capital to make it in the city. There is no aunt or friend who can help or come to the rescue. The social fabric that cushions the less privileged in the rural areas is often not there in the ‘dog eat dog’ urban areas. Often stories are told of how young people have slept on the streets and ate from trash bins when they first moved to the city in search of greener pastures.

Recently, I have noticed that commercial sex workers in Johannesburg have become younger and younger, with quite a number of them being of school-going age. Although there are many factors that account for this change, unrealised dreams upon arriving in cities play a major role in forcing young women into sex work. Criminals also take advantage of young women’s vulnerability, trafficking them for sex slavery. While in the rural areas underage women may be forced by their parents to marry as a way of rescuing the family from poverty, in urban areas young women and men enter into transactional sexual relationships with older men and women in exchange for accommodation, college fees, clothes, food et cetera. In both cases, the choices for young people are limited, thereby increasing
their vulnerability. Yet, human development for everyone involves expanding choices and freedoms (UN Development Programme (UNDP), 2016, p. 8). For this marginalised group of young women, economic freedom is the key to all other freedoms.

The Gauteng MEC for Safety and Security, Sizakele Nkosi-Malobane, commenting on public service protests, lamented that one of the taxi-strike protest was marred by criminal elements since most of the protesters were young people who should have been in school. However, she did not interrogate why this was the case. Although the poor are exempt from paying school fees in South Africa, as provided for by the South African Schools Act (Dass & Rinquest, 2010, p. 143), other factors, such as a lack of uniforms or food and teenage pregnancy, can lead scholars to drop out of school. In addition, violence and gangsterism in schools keep young people from accessing education. One realises that the lines between the rural poor and the urban poor have become blurred, both characterised by a lack of means to break the cycle of poverty. Frye, Glenn and Nojekwa (2011, p. 258) state that South African cities after among some of the most unequal cities in the world and this inequality has ‘woman’, ‘black’ and ‘young’ as some of its characteristics. Therefore, tackling urban poverty is not an option but a must, if African governments dream of improving the lives of young people.

With the realisation that Africa’s population is increasingly becoming urban, the promotion of urban safety becomes critical. Young women in urban areas are able to access schools, universities, workplaces, places of worship, public transport networks, and so forth. However, there are unwritten rules on how women access these spaces. I remember when I was in high school, there were certain alleys and corridors that we as girls would not dare walk through during break time or on weekends because they were often lined by boys who would not necessarily physically hurt you, but they would dress you down by their gaze. This unwritten rule was reinforced by the whole school community at large, with girls being blamed if ever they were booed for going to these ‘no-go’ zones.

This scenario mirrors the unwritten rules in macro society. In this day, young women in urban areas have to consider carefully what they wear when going into public spaces. Incidences of young women being stripped naked for wearing a miniskirt are all too common (Hatcher, 2014; Vincent, 2009). Young women have to think carefully about whether they are safe jogging around their neighbourhood at any time of the day or night, or to put in extra hours at school or work. Although there has been a very slight decrease over the past few years, abductions and rape of women in South Africa remain a major cause for concern. The playing field is never equal between young women and men and between older and young people.

On the economic side, young women often have to work harder to prove that they are equally as good as their male counterparts at school, at work and in business. Adichie (2014, p. 15) narrates how she, as a qualified lecturer, was worried about what she was going to wear when she first taught a writing class in order for her to be taken seriously. Even when young women prove their capability, often they are expected to ‘sleep their way to the top’ by older men in positions of power, exploiting their need to earn a living, their desire to succeed, and putting them at a higher risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections from men who seek out multiple sexual partners (Botha, 2016; Stoebenau et al., 2011). If urban centres are to present real opportunities for the youth, all measures have to be taken to ensure the safety of young women in public spaces. Women should never have to worry about the price they have to pay for being active participants in the economy.
The agency of the youth

It is important to state that, despite periodic or situational exclusion from public spaces, young women find ways to tell their stories in any way they can, even in subversive ways if the situation calls for it. Young women are challenging their exclusion and demanding space in private platforms in their homes and relationships and on public platforms. Increasingly, young women are contesting for political office and participating in spaces which were unimaginable historically, such as traditional courts. For example, Pamela Zimunya of Zimbabwe became a headwoman in her ward at the age of 23—likely the youngest person and woman to hold such a position in the history of Zimbabwe (Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT), 2012). Zimunya has had to be very brave, having faced severe opposition, including attempts on her life, and her promotion is a quite feat and an exciting development for African women everywhere.

The Institute for Young Women’s Development (IYWD) in the Mashonaland Central province of Zimbabwe has tackled the issue of young women’s economic empowerment holistically (Shout Africa, 2016). The Institute engaged Virl Micro Finance in Zimbabwe (VIRL Rural & Social Financial Services Website) to tailor a training programme for young entrepreneurs that included modules on business management, record keeping, accessing markets, accessing capital, policy advocacy, and self-care, among others. IYWD reports that this personalised training helped build the confidence of young women to the extent that they noticed an increase in their sales success and business acumen. Some changed their dress code to look more professional for the benefit of the business. The young women were also able to successfully engage the local authorities on allocating authorised stalls and market places where the police would not harass them. The young women formed cooperative groups and were thus able to access start up finance to begin organic fish farming to feed their families and to sell. The livelihoods of these young women have completely changed as the farming business is expanding and attracting more funding to increase the number of fish ponds. Tariro Mhute, IYWD’s communication and information officer, stated:

Young women are now participating in decision making processes. Currently we have four women from Masembura and Bindura rural who sit in the Chiefs Council. Their participation in the traditional courts is strategic as it enables them to tackle issues of domestic violence and child marriages (Shout Africa, 2016).

In Lesotho, the Morija Museum and Archives hosts The Hub, a digital-based social space that brings youths and e-activists together to use technology for social creation, expression, communication and education. The Hub engages local volunteers in all its day-to-day operations, not only to assist the coordinator with logistical operations but, more importantly, to give them responsibility in planning and leading educational workshops and sessions. These responsibilities and activities have led to notable improvements in the volunteers’ skills base, confidence levels and leadership competencies. Members of The Hub frequently use the space to complete online courses and to apply for work and study opportunities. Thejane Malakane, a teacher from the town of Morija, has been involved in The Hub including in a session on Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Online Studying at The Hub and the Hour of Code. This year, Malakane was one of the 15 Basotho awarded the Washington Mandela Fellowship for Young African Leaders and is currently in Phoenix, Arizona. The following are testimonials from some of The Hub members.

Teboho Sekhesa: The Hub keeps me busy away from the street where I might be tempted to do bad things.

Mpatile Mohapinyane: If I don’t have data in my phone, I know I can just go to The Hub and do my homework there. I don’t bother my mother about helping me with my homework anymore.

Hlompho Seeisa: My performance at school has improved a lot since The Hub came to Morija.

Thabo Mohloboli: I didn’t know that I can learn online, but since I became a member of The Hub I have more than five certificates I obtained online that will boost my CV.

Youth empowerment programmes that are holistic, such as the examples above, have the ability to transform people, families, communities and nations at large. There are other examples from other parts of
Africa that are enabling the youth to realise their full potential. However, these examples should not be isolated cases. These should be the norm with the main aim of making Africa’s youth population its most valued asset.

ICTs bridging the gap

The divide between urban and rural is increasingly closing through the virtual space. Technological advancements, such as smartphones and satellite television, have led to the access of spaces that historically were urban and elitist. Research shows that 90 percent of rural households in South Africa have access to cell phones (Ramoroka & Jacobs, 2013). Young people in rural areas are using social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and others – to introduce themselves to the world and get to know what other young people in their countries and the world at large are occupied with. As a social media user, I am part of multiple communities with people from all over the world, rural and urban included. Recently, I have come to learn of the skit-making and vlogging phenomena happening among mainly young people. They record skits on their phones. However, this is not just about entertainment. These emergent videographers earn a decent living from revenue generated through online views.

At a recent OSISA consultation with young people, they urged OSISA to find out where young people are in their efforts to support youth work. I contend that although we may find that young people are located both in the rural and urban areas, their presence in the virtual – as both a place and space where they are defining their existence and worth – should be a high consideration. Young people defining and introducing themselves as coming from a specific place, be it Lusaka, Lagos or Luanda, urban Algeria or rural Zimbabwe, will become less important than them defining their presence on Twitter or Facebook, for example, and how they are leveraging this space to access resources and connect with other people.

Policymakers should remove the barriers that limit young people’s access to this virtual public space. The cost of data and Internet access are the biggest inhibitors. According to The Africa Report, the continent has ‘the lowest Internet penetration rate and the highest internet prices in the world’ (Laary, 2016). If future economies will be anchored on information, knowledge, digitals and technology, Africa has to invest in this sector politically. The youth, whether in school, college, unemployed or running their own businesses, need to access the Internet for them to participate in the global economy meaningfully. Governments in Africa should invest in free Wi-Fi Hot Spots in public spaces that young people can access. For example, in the Macha community in the rural Southern Province of Zambia, subsistence farmers are crediting their success to the skills that they acquire from the Internet through free broadband provided to the community (van Stam & van Greunen, 2014). Governments should explore public-private partnerships to sustain such investments.

Because we know that young people are found in virtual spaces, youth services should be provided in these spaces. School dropout youths and young nursing mothers should be able to complete their schooling and tertiary education. Enrolling and completing their education online or with the aid of a teacher through community radio, local newspapers or any other viable channel should be possible. Such programmes must be promoted to pregnant girls and young mothers who find it particularly challenging to attend and cope in the school environment. Education provision cannot remain traditional when we know that the target population is moving in a different trajectory. Education should become increasingly informal, enabling young minds to be as innovative as they can be wherever they are. ‘HowTo’ and ‘WhereTo’ guides accessed on the internet will greatly benefit the youth. Young people move from rural to urban centres in search of resources to better their lives. If such resources become available in the rural areas, migration will decrease. This does not mean that rural youths should feel unwelcome or discouraged from moving to cities. Rather, the intention is to decrease the pressure on urban areas, and ensure individuals coming to the

Weekend workshop on film-making and animation at The Hub in Morija, Lesotho. The story created for the animation was of a superhero shepherd who teaches people to not litter.
cities are better equipped and not disappointed or taken advantage. It is also important for families to remain together if at all possible, and for women from rural areas to have the choice to stay and build their own communities if they want to, instead of having to move away and be separated from their children and support groups. Thus, the value of quality education for rural girls and women cannot be underestimated.

Having said this, much work needs to be done to make the virtual space safe. In the recent past, there have been several severe cases of cyber bullying and revenge pornography towards young women (Geldenhuys, 2016; Chisala-Tempelhoff & Kirya, 2016). These attacks shut this space down for the victims and others who would rather be cautious and not get involved at all in the first place. Facebook has reported that it is researching and investing in ways that will make the platform free and safe following spates of hate speech and posts about acts of violence (Zuckerberg, 2017). Provision of Wi-Fi hotspots needs to take these issues into account and make the safety of young women non-negotiable.

The young rural woman in 2030

In conclusion, my realisation is that although there will be a difference between rural and urban youths’ experiences, this difference should be their location, and not as a result of it. The youth from both environments experience space and place the same way. Factors such as a lack of capital and societal norms and culture push them out of the political and economic centre. Enablers, such as affordable technology, capital, skills and the unlearning of patriarchal mindsets, will bring the youth to the core of development. I envision a 25-year-old rural young woman in 2030 who is technologically perceptive and feels safe and confident in accessing and making use of the resources available to her, such as land and water, and able to add value to these resources. She would be able to access markets to sell whatever goods she may be producing and participating fully in how she and her family benefit from the resources in her community and how decisions are made. Only when young people, both in rural and urban areas, are telling a progressively different story than today, can we as Africa say we have attained the SDGs. Only then can we say we have harnessed the youth demographic dividend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tsitsi Fungurani is a black African Feminist who works with OSISA. She received a Master of Science degree in sociology and social anthropology from the University of Zimbabwe. Tsitsi is interested in issues surrounding economic freedom as a key that unlocks other freedoms, choices and alternatives especially for women. Tsitsi coordinates the editorial team for BUWAI Journal for African Women’s Experiences and has contributed a few articles on issues affecting young women.

NOTES

See their website at https://thehubatmorija.co.ls
The Hour of Code is a global movement that reaches millions of students across the globe. It introduces individuals of all ages to computer science and demystifies computer coding, but is especially aimed at the youth. Visit https://hourofcode.com/us/learn

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In her 2015 book, *What if there were no whites in South Africa*, highly-respected editor Ferial Haffajee recounted the story of arriving as a young reporter at the *Financial Mail* and daring to question why there were no black columnists for the publication and only one woman. The answer she got drove her to assemble names of suitable people whose voices would enhance the publication’s ability to give voice and recognition to the majority of South Africans.

Haffajee’s account (see pp 8-9) shows how in each mainstream media space where she has worked (*Financial Mail*, then *Mail & Guardian*, and then *City Press*) she has enlarged the possibilities for voice by making sure that the range of sources and opinions is increasingly widened. At first she compiled (with William Mervin Gumede) *The Little Black Book*, a list of significant black thinkers and professionals, then the *Women’s Book*, then *200 Young South Africans You Must Take to Lunch*, and then *100 World Class South Africans*. Each time she deliberately sought out the names of people who were ignored by mainstream journalists and editors.

Haffajee is one of few editors who have tried to make a significant impact on the South African media landscape, which is not only highly commercialised but also still significantly racialised. The ANC has strongly criticised the mainstream print media for its lack of transformation and ownership diversity – a legacy of its apartheid past, where a small monopoly of white owners controlled the entire print industry (Malila 2014). The mainstream press still caters for a middle class audience in its need to satisfy the demands of advertising which looks for the most lucrative audience. While the media emerged from apartheid as the “watchdogs” of society, they have taken their lead not from the issues which plague the majority, but continue to target an elite minority. As such, Friedman argues that they are “neither the ‘eyes and ears’ of society, nor its watchdogs... but perform both functions, not for all of society, but for the suburban middle class” (2011: 107).

We have argued (Garman & Malila, 2017) that the emphasis in South African journalism needs to shift away from the idea that journalists give “voice to the voiceless”, because the current mainstream media don’t understand the lived situations of “the voiceless” majority. Instead, the media should be honing their active listening skills, and overhauling the routinised ways in which journalists conceive of stories within beats, and the way they source experiences and opinions (which still rest heavily on official sources and those already known).

Alongside the mainstream media is the emergence of multiple publications and outlets on digital media platforms, and the outpouring of stories and experiences which prioritise the situations of young people, women, and black South Africans. How do young, black women using these platforms understand their worth as vehicles for expression, and how do these platforms interact with and relate to the mainstream media? In order to understand this situation we interviewed Zaza Motha, founder of the online *Pout* magazine (now launching as a print magazine); Panashe Chigumadzi, co-founder of the online *Vanguard* magazine (now on hold); Milisuthando Bongela, a blogger who was hired by *City Press* and is now Arts Editor of the *Mail & Guardian*; and Mishka Wazar, a journalist for *The Daily Vox*.

Four women, four stories

Zaza Motha sat and watched the minute-long news story unfold on a television set in her neighbour’s living room. Zaza and her five siblings had been rushed out of their house to avoid the gruesome scene and to make
way for the journalists. It had been a day of sadness and torment for her but there was hope since the world would hear about it. The journalists had rushed to the scene to take photographs, get names, and ask a lot of questions. They had asked more questions than this news bulletin answered but that was it. A story was told and the world knew what she had lost that day. The only bit of justice she would ever get from the events of the day was now over, and the next headline was introduced. She was only seven but she already knew that if the world was ever to hear her story, she would have to tell it herself.

"From then on obviously being raised by a single dad was very painful," says the 33-year-old founder of Pout magazine, "I wrote a lot just to express my pain through my poetry in my scrapbooks but later I found out that I could do journalism."

Motha went on to study journalism and pitch her story to as many publications as possible, but found that the story was either not in line with the publication’s ethos or was considered outdated because it had happened such a long time ago. "I found out that I could pitch my story but I could not get it published because of the beat. They would say it is irrelevant because of the happenings in apartheid and now we are post-apartheid, in democracy," says Motha. "But I still needed to tell my story; what happened to me was unfair because it was traumatic and I didn’t understand how a person could be killed because of the colour of their skin – it did not make sense to me."

For Motha and many other black women, South African mainstream media has not been a platform where they can tell their stories, because their experiences do not fit the news agenda. "When I was pitching, I became obsessed with the media industry because then I understood more about media ownership," Motha explained. "If you start a media platform or business it is according to your frame of reference, so I started Pout because my frame of reference is a black female who didn’t have a voice or space to share my experience."

This story, although unique, is familiar to many other women who also feel the need to tell their stories. Panashe Chigumadzi started in financial journalism, making sure to pick up the skills she needed as a writer to pursue her interest in exploring the kind of stories one gets to tell of oneself. After a pitch for a local edition of an international magazine fell through, Chigumadzi decided that she did not need external approval or validation, and she co-founded the online magazine Vanguard for black women like herself to tell their stories.

“When we started the magazine, we just wanted to be like a black Marie Claire or a black Elle,” she said. “We were first interested in fashion and a range of different things and thinking around how do we punt pro-black things without scaring people off.” But as more young people took to social media to express their views on South African politics and identity politics by forming social movements, Vanguard magazine evolved to accommodate its audience.

“Things started changing: social media conversations started changing and things started happening on campuses, we were in a great position to start talking about things that concern the country,” said Chigumadzi. “We began to talk about what it means to be young and black as the magazine evolved into a platform which was more explicit in its black consciousness and black feminism.”

While Vanguard magazine has been placed on hold due to financial constraints, it played a role in creating an interest in the stories of young black women in the mainstream media. This interest however, tends to remain at a superficial level.

“The increased interest in black women has given a type of hypervisibility that is coupled with an invisibility,” says Chigumadzi. “[These] platforms are not particularly interested in what can come out of the conversation.
beyond click-bait or ticking the box of ‘we are giving black women a platform’. You are characterised into an image of black womanhood and it is usually an angry black woman, which is a favourite kind of stereotype.”

Chigumadzi believes that social media plays a vital role as a platform for black women to express themselves, and mainstream media organisations are aware of this. “They know that they don’t know what black people want beyond the talk about hair and those easy black subjects, so you will have management and ownership that remains white and the black interns do the work of telling us what is happening on black Twitter,” she says. “Black women are writing on Facebook and through Twitter threads, and publications are sifting through this to get their content without doing the real work of ensuring that black women have a real say.”

While Chigumadzi outlines the issue of voice and platform being at the heart of the silencing of black women’s voices, she says that her personal journey has placed her in a position where she has to be careful of the type of narrative she allows to be portrayed of black women. “There are a lot of negotiations that you have to make because with media right now, especially with the idea of black girl magic, it is just to be looked at and to be seen and not to be heard,” she says.

Mail & Guardian Arts Editor Milisuthando Bongela believes that outside of mainstream, traditional media there are platforms that can create a powerful space for black women’s stories. “There is an increasingly blurring line between traditional media and online media,” she says. “Online is interrupting traditional media to bring forth the voices of the people who haven’t had a chance to speak.”

Bongela argues that, while platforms are needed for black women, they are often granted only because the woman is black. For stories to be seen rather than just heard, the writer’s identity should only be a matter of fact after reading rather than why stories are being read. “I don’t want to be praised because I am a black woman, I want to be praised because I am doing good work,” says Bongela. “Right now my struggle is focusing on whether the work is good so that it can speak for itself, and people won’t need to place my race or my gender at the centre of it.”

Bongela started sharing her stories during a trip to New York in 2010, when she created a blog that she intended to share only with her friends and family. “I didn’t start because I thought, ‘oh let me create a platform’, I started because I had something to say,” says Bongela. “Now that we have this new kind of storytelling, I didn’t have to be attached to a news organisation and I could just put out a blog and say things. I would post stories of what was happening, where I went that day with photographs. And when I came back people told me to carry on writing. I did, and it grew into something bigger.”

Bongela attributes her success as a blogger to the fact that she was able to offer a fresh perspective and voice as opposed to traditional media offerings. “It was during the rise of blogging and I was able to gain traction from the stories and the way I wrote them,” she says. “I started to get an audience because people were not seeing that kind of writing and storytelling reflected in traditional media.”

For traditional news organisations to listen and respond to the stories of young black women in the same way as on alternative platforms such as blogs and social media, they must ensure that they hire women who can actually tell them. “I didn’t plan to have a job at the Mail & Guardian but what I was doing in my life outside any institution was exactly the same as what I am doing here now, except I am now working with other people and other writers, it is not just me and my point of view,” says Bongela.

Bongela argues that, even though in the past there was not a culture of black editorship or a culture of women who worked in the literary landscape, there has been significant change in recent years. “In my experience of the Mail & Guardian in about two years, I have had a lot of female leaders especially now with Khadija Patel [the current editor] and the number of black women that she is hiring essentially to transform the newsroom. We are living in a good time. Now that we are in these spaces we are shaping them according to our experiences as black women.”

Perhaps it is one of the brand-new news outlets in our media space, The Daily Vox, which is most overtly attempting to reshape the way journalism operates in South Africa. Twenty-year-old Mishka Wazar is the youngest member of The Daily Vox team, and started her storytelling career through participating in discussions about black womanhood on social media. She attributes her freedom to tell her

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Mail & Guardian Arts Editor, Milisuthando Bongela. “Online is interrupting traditional media to bring forth the voices of the people who haven’t had a chance to speak.”
stories (and those of others like her) to the mentorship she received from the founders of The Daily Vox, Khadija Patel and Azad Essa. “I joined The Daily Vox straight out of high school,” says Wazar. “I sent them an email and, because they want young voices and prioritise young voices, they gave me an opportunity. They gave me a platform and they gave me the training I needed to do what I can do today.”

Having learnt to think critically about her voice and the voices of the marginalised in the country through social media, Wazar argues that it is an important space for women in South Africa. “Women are not allowed a physical space to voice their concerns, so social media becomes a third space to talk and to create communities. Black women use social media to engage with The Daily Vox, not just to agree or disagree, but to provide deeper analysis into the stories themselves.”

Social media discussions, if used to inform the news agenda, can play a vital role in telling the stories of young black women. This however, depends on the media platform’s ability to respond effectively and affectively. “The Daily Vox has emerged as a platform for South African youth to speak, and it received a lot of recognition during the Fees Must Fall protests, providing a different perspective from the one found on mainstream media platforms,” says Wazar. “We centred the narrative on the voices of the black women who were heading the protests at almost every university, and relied on social media not just for distribution but to find out what the readers wanted to hear and how they wanted their stories to be told.”

**Conclusion**

It is clear that for young black women who want to tell the stories of their lives and experiences, digital media provides platforms for them to express themselves when they cannot get a hearing otherwise. These platforms also allow them to both control their message and develop an audience. Social media provides ways to refine and develop their thinking within communities with similar concerns. It is true that it is still hard to get the attention of many of the mainstream media outlets, but the dividing line between digital/social media and the mainstream media is not as fixed as it once was.

There are many ways in which voices and stories on digital, self-initiated platforms cross over into mainstream media. This has both good and bad effects. The best situation is when women like Bongela make a name for themselves and their journalism, and are able to move from informal platforms, acquire editorial positions, and maintain their commitment to inclusive media by influencing news agendas, placing emphasis on stories that have previously been neglected, and empowering other young, black women. The worst situation is when the mainstream media cynically cut and paste from the stories being generated on digital platforms in order to appear to be inclusive, and when the hard work of employing young, black women and giving them the freedom to significantly alter the news agenda from within is not taking place.

Given the complexity of the media landscape, the resistance of many news outlets to change, and the uncertainty of the financial situation of the digital environment, it is remarkable that so many young black women persist in finding ways to tell their stories. We have a long way to go before the stories of the majority become integral to media and journalism in South Africa. Nevertheless, these four women are symptomatic of a powerful drive to shape new spaces and to reshape old spaces so that they better accommodate the voices of young, black South Africans.
YOUNG, BLACK WOMEN STORYTELLERS and the reshaping of the media space

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Thandi Bombi is a first year Masters Student at the Rhodes University Journalism and Media Studies department. She previously majored in writing and editing. Writing short stories and poetry allows her to freely express her creative self. She draws creative inspiration from her experience of the surrounding world. She is currently attempting to use communication strategies to enhance secondary school learners’ experience in the classroom. She wants to give a voice – through writing – to some of the issues black women go through in South Africa.

Anthea Garman is an associate professor in the school of journalism and media studies at Rhodes University in South Africa where she teaches journalism practice, long form journalism and multimedia journalism. She is the author of Antjie Krog and the Postapartheid Public Sphere (UKZN Press 2015) and co-editor with Herman Wasserman of Media and Citizenship (HSRC Press 2017).

Vanessa Malila is Head of the Advocacy Impact Programme at the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM). She holds a PhD in communication studies from the University of Leeds, which examines the role of the media as a stakeholder in communications policy formation in Kenya. She was a Postdoc Research Fellow based at the School of Journalism & Media Studies at Rhodes University between 2015 and 2016, working within the Mellon Media & Citizenship project. Her areas of interest include the role of the media in social accountability, the use of social media in social accountability, and how to understand social accountability across contexts.

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Storytelling is an essential part of African indigenous knowledge systems, and it differs from dominant mainstream forms of knowledge (such as news or academic research). Young women are using digital technology to tell their stories in a way that challenges patriarchal narratives, and to promote social justice.

We live in a “disciplinary society”, where we are taught standards of behaviour, habits, fashion, and a complex system of culture. The advent of digital technologies or platforms (such as blogging, podcasts, web-camming, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat) provide scope and opportunity to challenge and change some of these set norms. They have given us the opportunity to think not only about the impact of technological change on the meaning of our culture, but also about the “rightness” of prior positions taken in relation to social norms.

One of the norms that has recently been challenged is the relationship of women to technology. Women are not expected to make use of technology in our patriarchal societies. Their struggles have been told through “solitary” eyes of particular institutions, telling us how to understand certain things about them (Msimang, 2017). However, some women are challenging this regime of order and shame, resisting the dominant patriarchal ideologies through the political tool of digital storytelling.

This article critically discusses why digital storytelling is a central tool not only to empower women, but also as a means of bringing about social justice, particularly in Africa. It assesses the limitations of digital storytelling, and argues that storytelling is a very important tool for social activism.

Defining digital storytelling

Storytelling has been there since time immemorial. Once upon a time we sat around the fire and told each other stories. It could have been about history, or just about anything. But what stood out in African storytelling (and still does), is that women’s struggles were almost always told through the male voice.

Women’s personal stories were shared only with their families and friends. Even if they were given the opportunity to speak, African women were largely confined to the private space of home and motherhood, which shaped the kind of stories they could tell. You often hear African women’s voices at the water well, or in public transport, talking about the price of maize at the market, catching up on the latest village news, and sharing their joy at the birth of a new baby. But recent
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Technological developments have seen African women raising their voices through platforms such as song and music, recounting the day-to-day struggles of women trying to provide the best for their children, and to shape the societies in which they live.

Digital storytelling is quite a new phenomenon (Jay 2008), and digital storytellers make great efforts to convince the world of the uniqueness and usefulness of storytelling through the internet. According to the Digital Storytelling Association (Sadik 2008), "digital storytelling is considered the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. It is a continuous development of storytelling by taking it from the campfire to the silver screen, and then to the computer". This means taking the traditional personal story and enhancing it with digital elements, such as images, music, and narrative voice (Khebbaz 2016:2). Women can now make videos of themselves telling their stories, raising awareness on particular issues, and denouncing the norm that African women keep things to themselves. They are breaking the silence.

Research has shown that interactive digital technology is ideally suited to capture oral stories in a way that is not possible through non-interactive media such as texts (Marsden et al, 2010). Oral stories always had a function in society, entertaining and educating people at the same time (Jay, 2008). Digital stories are used in the same way as oral stories in the past, and play a similar role in contemporary society.

Problems with the mainstream ways of storytelling

Before turning to the centrality of digital storytelling in social activism, it is important to engage with the problems that the status quo presents. In modern society, there is a tendency to rely on the media (news) or research papers as tools to access information. We also see information being published through government policies and government media briefings that give voice to issues affecting women in Africa. We have seen doctors, historians, and other professionals attempting to explain the African women's struggle. However, the main problem is that the stories they represent are filtered or processed stories, which often become the dominant stories that people know and believe.

There is also the problem of audience in all these narratives. Academics may do research on a particular issue affecting women in Africa, but who is their audience? Often it is just academics talking among themselves about women. This does not mean that their work is irrelevant, but it is important to realise that intellectual theory is not necessarily emancipatory. As Immanuel Kant once said "experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play" (Society for the Advancement of General Systems Theory 1962: 11).

Politicians’ (government) stories do not fare any better. They tend to say things that the audience want to hear. For years now, there have been policies and legislation meant to put women’s interests on the map, but there is not enough engagement with what women actually go through. All they produce is a summary of the struggles that some women go through, and how they hope to bring about social justice.

Rootes (1990:1) argues that there is no inherent conflict between an interest in understanding the world (in this instance African women’s struggles) and a determination to change it; it is merely that whereas theory may be comfortably remote from action, action which is not informed by theoretical understanding will often be counterproductive.

There is a disconnection between what is being said and what is actually happening on the ground. The story is being told through the lens of an institution which has certain political ambitions.

African history has for the most part been told from a western perspective. This makes it hard to find information that really goes to the heart of defining African women’s struggles. Again the issue of audience becomes apparent. History was used as a tool to feed the ideology that Africa was a dark continent and needed civilisation. So there are obviously some distortions in our African history that make it hard for women’s problems to be articulated.

The media industry (film and broadcasting) perpetuates the same ideologies. There is a monopoly of information, though the construction of dominant narratives that tend to exclude some stories as being “not newsworthy”. The media are always after the “hot” topics, rather than reflecting the reality of social groups in society. They filter and set the agenda in terms of what is worth disseminating to the audience. When something happens that warrants the voices of women, there is always someone who will speak on their behalf. For example, the opinion of the Minister of Women in the President’s Office is often sought on issues affecting women, although women are not homogenous and do not experience life in the same way as a cabinet minister does.

The centrality of storytelling in activism

Digital storytelling is the new vehicle for young women to bring about social justice. Not only is having a voice a fundamental right, but it is central to undoing the dehumanisation that has limited the recognition of young women in social justice issues. Voice does not mean only a literal voice (the sound produced by the vocal cords in the ears of others), but also the ability to experience oneself, to speak up, to participate and be experienced as a free person with rights (Solnit 2017:3).
Unlike in the male-dominated mainstream music and video industry, young African women have access to both the means of production and the means of distribution through their phones. This self-production provides a forum for them to express themselves freely with little mediation between creator and audience. Storytelling engages people at every level, not just in their minds, but also their emotions, values and imaginations, which are the drivers of real change (Hodges, 2014: 2).

To bring about social change, young African women must learn to tell (and listen to) a new set of stories about the world and about the Africa that they want to create.

According to Paull (2002), digital storytelling helps to create personal and social agency. It is an iterative process, which allows young African women to become their own narrators. It allows them to co-create their own lives and gives them agency. They become change-makers, and they develop a sense of ownership and control over their realities and concerns (Khebbaz 2016: 8), disrupting the structures that de-value their struggles. When women are provided with an opportunity to speak or write about their own experiences, they start to “reconsider old messages of devaluation”, and by doing that they pave the way for new messages or narratives, in a form that often defies previous narratives from the past (Khebbaz 2016:12).

Digital storytelling transforms and opens up a dialogue, encouraging conversations that were not encouraged. Character is where readers forge emotional connections with stories, and well-crafted dialogue can deepen an audience’s involvement with the characters (and with the story). This provides a sense of self-healing. Perry (2015:2) expresses it well when she says:

*black women, as a group, experience some of the most traumatic and oppressive conditions when it comes to our reproductive choices, ability to parent, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, education, and housing, among other things. But by sharing our experiences and how we deal with such issues, we can heal others and ourselves.*

Communities differ from one another. There have been attempts to represent “universal” challenges that African women face, but this sometimes falls short of the intersectionality of issues such as race, where one is situated in the social strata, and the kind of socialisation one had. Digital storytelling becomes important because it allows authors to examine themselves, reflect, craft and tell stories that would otherwise have not been told. This goes to the heart of the issue of audience; people tend to listen more when they are included in the storyline.

To bring about social justice, attitudes have to be changed. The power of storytelling has that potential to change the negative attitudes surrounding certain social issues. To change attitudes, one has to appeal to emotions. A first-hand account allows the audience to step into the young women’s shoes in order to understand her hopes and concerns. Once audiences are exposed to such experiences, they may feel connected, and alter not only their judgments but also their attitudes.

Owning the means of production allows for flexibility. Young African women who are members of “minorities” (and not necessarily activists) have the opportunity to give a different perspective on issues of social justice. They can create stories in their own language. They can say whatever they want with no apologies or explanations, even if it will be misunderstood by the public (Scott 1998) — “nobody can tell you what to do or what not to do. It is a very creative and controllable form of expression” (Saski 2002: 4).

Digital storytelling can be used as a tool for mobilisation. Through blogs, podcasts, and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), personal information is made immediately and widely available. We have seen the rise of movements such #BlackLivesMatter, #FeesMustFall, #NotInMyName, #MenAreTrash and #MeToo, which have mobilised societies to challenge racism, colonial attitudes, patriarchy, and rape.
Limitations of digital storytelling

Digital storytelling is not all benevolent. It has its limitations. This is not meant as a deterrent, but to make storytellers mindful of issues that they might overlook. Msimang (2017) spoke on TEDx about some of the challenges that storytelling presents, saying that people should be mindful that storytelling can create an illusion of solidarity. Simply because people are listening to your story does not mean they are in agreement with you. Speaking out has the potential to disrupt existing structures, and can be seen as “deviant”.

People might not relate to or share the same experience as the storyteller. There is no one universal type of struggle that women experience. For example, white women’s struggles are not necessarily the same as black women’s experiences. Black women’s stories may be sifted through the lenses of their white female counterparts.

Even with these reservations, digital storytelling has considerable potential as a tool for activism for social justice. Digital storytelling will allow voices to be heard without the restrictions of borders, finances, or watchful institutions.

Conclusion

Digital storytelling allows new ways to support the public telling of silenced narratives (Ray 2016). According to Msimang (2017), stories are beginning to replace other forms of narrative, such as news. Emotions are the new way of connecting with people, because people value what they feel more than what they know.

This article has shown the importance of digital storytelling as a tool that can be used to bring about social justice. The onus is on young African women to take a stand, and not let the history of silence remain central to women’s stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Tapiwa Benza holds a BA degree in sociology as well as an LLB (Law) degree from Rhodes University. He is doing an internship at OSISA, working with the youths, arts and culture Programme, the women’s rights programme, and the partnerships programme. He is Zimbabwean.

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In my late 20s, I fell in love with Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s words. In part, it was because I understood the world she was describing. I had not yet been to Nigeria and knew nothing of Nsukka – the university town that features so prominently in so many of her books and stories. Still, that didn’t matter. I knew the striving and the drive, the piety and the pride that drove her characters because I had seen them in the household in which I grew up. I recognised my people and their ambitions, and so Purple Hibiscus became my story too.

I love books for different reasons. I loved Alice in Wonderland because it mapped out an imaginary world I would never have ventured into on my own. I loved Oliver Twist because I understood the longing Dickens so painstakingly described.

There are some books that you love because reading them is a struggle. Albert Camus’ L’etranger has a special place in my heart because I read it in French when I was in high school. It was hard work grappling with existentialism in a language I had only heard in school. Yet, Camus was preoccupied with making sense of a society built on the same sorts of inequalities and corruptions I knew so well. The complications and difficulties of that book are etched in my heart. In other words, most books matter because of who you are at the time you are reading them. This is precisely why Adichie meant so much to me.

I was not alone. Adichie’s arrival on the literary scene was heralded with much excitement because she was precisely the sort of writer many women of my generation needed, and ours is a powerful and unique generation. Born after colonialism had ended, we are free, and the continent in which we grew up was still gleaming with possibilities. Although by the time I was 30, Africa was seen as a ‘basket-case’, the Africa of my childhood was not yet a failure. Adichie found a way to articulate that. She was writing the kind of books many of us had been wanting to read. She represented the future so many of us had known as children.

I had not yet thought I might pursue writing in any serious way, but I saw myself as the sort of confident young woman whose ideas might matter and be taken seriously. Before her, I had devoured the books of Miriama Ba,
Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sindiwe Magona, and a host of African women whose writing had been crucial to my intellectual formation. However, none of them were my contemporaries. None had come of age alongside me in the way Adichie had. I saw myself in the worlds she created, but I also saw myself as a fellow traveller, as someone who was striking out on a new path in her field. I was doing what she was doing in a sense, just in my own small professional patch.

In many ways then Adichie occupied a unique place in contemporary black women’s thought and literature for at least a decade before the phrase ‘black girl magic’ was coined and was used as a hashtag and as the motto for a new generation’s struggle for recognition and self-love.

Adichie is African of course but, because she began writing in a world that is more global than it had ever been, because she travelled so frequently between Nigeria and America, she was easily claimed as a member of a much larger global African diaspora. She may technically belong to two countries, but she is collectively seen as a daughter or a sister to black people in a broader sense.

In other words, Adichie has become a signifier for something larger than herself. In some ways, she has marked the rise of what Taiye Selassie calls, ‘the Afropolitan’. The phrase is problematic, and I use it fully aware of its complications. Still, part of the Adichie phenomenon has been the sense for many Africans who are similarly located as citizens of Africa as a concept, that if success was possible for her in the world of arts and letters, then surely, we might all succeed in the various new terrains we sought to master – from engineering to cosmetic surgery to venture capital.

It was when we began to project our dreams onto her that loving Adichie, as a symbol, rather than her books, became murky. This is not unique to Adichie, but it provides a stark example of the limits of black girl magic. It plays in the dangerous terrain in which we believe that:

there is some sort of inherent connection between all brown-skinned persons. We know something. We necessarily connect... all group identities are constructed. However, some group identities run away with us. Some become harmful, or even work against the purpose they were created to defeat... the ‘Afropolitan’ is just such a group identity. It is exclusive, elitist and self-aggrandizing (Tveit, 2013).

By the time Adichie’s (2009) ‘Danger of a single story’ TED talk was released, she was already flirting with fame. The talk has been viewed almost three million times to date, and it helped her to take the first serious steps towards international fame. It became a manifesto, a sort of treatise for a new generation of feminists of all races, but of a very particular class and background, who were looking for more complicated ways of understanding the world than their mothers had been able to provide.

Both in its substance and in its form, the talk laid the foundation for the sort of hero Adichie would be. She was at once acceptable – pretty and made up, but not too much – and rebellious. She broke the rules by not memorising the talk. She read her talk because she was not the sort who would be pushed to adhere to silly rules about how to give ‘good’ TED talks. She stood in jeans and a head-wrap and read her comments. The ease of her words and the common sense style of her delivery were at once charming and intimidating. Adichie was haughty and no nonsense and infinitely poised in a way that was instantly recognisable to me as a middle-class African woman who had met many women raised in Adichie’s mould. She was not a new phenomenon to me, she was simply a newly celebrated phenom, and I allowed myself the indulgence of enjoying the moment as though it were my own.

The talk cemented her status as the sort of intellectual rock star, the kind of literary and cultural maven many of us had been looking for. Even in her form, she was supremely of the moment. Giving a record-breaking TED Talk is a supremely contemporary way to get famous, and it mapped out the ways in which a new generation of diligent and prodigious middle-class Africans hoped to make their mark. As the ‘Africa rising’ narrative swept across the pages of *Time Magazine* (December 2012), *The Economist* (December 2011), and *The Financial Times* (2011), Adichie’s star rose higher and higher.

While her book sales were significant, and her name was on the lips of more people than ever, it was her next talk, entitled ‘We should all be feminists’ (Adichie, 2012), that sealed her place in the firmament of literary and popular culture. She had tapped into an important conversation – albeit one that had been happening around her with far more complexity and rigour for many generations.

She was both able to speak to a mainstream audience, and signal to a core constituency of imagined and imaginary black women who were as Selassie might say, ‘nodding with recognition,’ at her words. She explained feminism so well that Beyoncé – a pop icon who is similarly able to signify to an imagined audience of black folks while speaking in a language the master understands and can commodify – included part of the talk in her song ‘Flawless’.

Since the release of ‘Flawless’, Adichie has increasingly been used as an expert on non-fiction matters relating to race, gender and African politics. Beyond her books, she has come to be recognised as a spokesperson in the west.

There are traps of course for any literary celebrity, and certainly for one who hails from Africa. As Professor Simon Gikandi (in Gikandi & Jefferess, 2006) points out:
Globalization creates all of these opportunities for novelists and writers; but at the same time, of course, again the more complex issue revolves around the terms of that globalization. Some people could argue... that in order for these fictions to become global, they have had to be involved in a fascinating and sometimes disturbing act of cultural translation because their audiences are no longer located in their sites of referent. Let me put it this way: there is a split between the object of representation, and the people who read it… works are set in East Africa but... readers are North American, and in that sense it would be interesting to ask what kinds of transactions have taken place so that these African fictions can succeed in a global scene. So the global scene, and globalization in general, are transforming the terms of cultural contact, but also transforming the forms of fiction.

Adichie has no control over this of course. These are forces far greater than she. At the same time, because she has walked so confidently into the realm of non-fiction and has agreed, on multiple occasions, to take up the mantle of ‘spokesperson’, there is an increasing expectation that she is more conservative in her feminism and her understanding of matters of sexuality and gender than many of her fans assumed. And, finally, it seems the sparkle has worn off Adichie. Both her comments and her clarifications were offensive. Yet, ‘celebrities’ wander into territory they aren’t equipped to navigate all the time, and, in so doing, they grossly oversimplify, flatten and demean the experiences of the people on whose behalf they claim to speak. So, in a sense, one might suggest her misstep was not such a big deal.

The difference is that Adichie is not Angelina Jolie. She has staked her reputation on substance and heft and thoughtfulness. Yet, the disappointment among members of LGBTI and feminist communities I spoke with after Adichie’s comments were published went deeper than that, and it is important to examine that disappointment and what it speaks to.

In part, Adichie’s overreach is bigger than her. It is a consequence of a growing culture of ‘stanning’. Adichie has been steeped in the celebrity culture that created the ‘Beyhive’, which functions as an emotional bodyguard for the singer, and she has been embraced and championed by the black girl magic movement. Stanning is not merely being a fan; it often involves taking on an active and confrontational stance in relation to defending one’s celebrity. The celebrity becomes an extension of the fan, a persona who stands in for the identities of those who love him or her. I understand the power of this feeling, and it is clear why Adichie has become as much of a celebrity as an African literary author can be in the midst of this climate.

There is a politics to the adoration of course. Beyonce’s fans are not unthinking robots. As Fezokuhle Mthonti (2016) notes in an essay in The Con, those who stan for Beyonce are ‘a complex set of people who traverse space and place in multiple and complicated ways.’ Mthonti decries ‘the assumption that we are a homogenous set of automatons who have no agency, no capacity for critical thought.’ Similarly, there is a politics that propels those who continue to admire Adichie, even in the face of her ‘transphobia’. It is a politics similar to that which keeps her fans publicly quiet, even as they wonder about her decision to agree to promote Boots No7 by suggesting, in a glamorous and expensive-looking ad, ‘The truth is, makeup doesn’t actually mean anything, it’s simply makeup’ (Bowen, 2016). Makeup is a choice of course, and the conversation about its role and place in the lives of...
women and men is an important one. To have that discussion in service of selling makeup is, at best, disingenuous and, at worst, patently self-serving. Still, the very fact of Adichie being chosen to represent a major fashion brand at all is seen as an affirmation — something not to be criticised but to be praised. The disquiet is quelled by the sense of being under siege, of always being scrutinised by the forces of racism and sexism. In this environment, raising questions — especially publicly — is seen as an attack.

It is clear then that the relative silence in relation to the commodification of Adichie’s messages, particularly her feminism, is a testament to the fact that black girl magic has reached the limit of its usefulness.

When CeShawn Thompson created the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic in 2013, she was giving a contemporary voice to a long-practised strategy for coping among the marginalised and excluded. The hashtag sought to push back against mainstream narratives about black women. The idea was simple. As a piece in the Huffington Post noted, ‘Black Girl Magic was used to illustrate the universal awesomeness of black women. It’s about celebrating anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves’ (Wilson, 2016).

It caught on. It has provided a quick and easy retort to those who have felt it necessary to deride Venus and Serena Williams. It helped to push back against those who suggested Viola Davis was not ‘classically beautiful’. It shone a spotlight on the achievements of Misty Copeland, Simone Biles, Michelle Obama, and a host of other African-American women who were in the public eye, but risked backlash. #BlackGirlMagic enveloped them in a protective blanket. As they soared, they were kept on course by a brigade of young black women wearing capes and making the air around them shimmer with beautiful arrogance.

As is almost always the case with pop culture, what began as a subaltern articulation with particular resonance among an internally cohesive group managed to spread. The phrase was a push-back, a statement about the virtual impossibility of continuing to exist in the face of daily threats to life and limb — especially in Europe and Australia, where black women are visible minorities, or in places like Brazil and South Africa, where blacks are the demographic majority but come up hard against the reality of the architecture of racism that has resisted dismantling. The phrase acknowledges — in a subtext that is easy for black women to understand — the idea that black women pull rabbits out of hats, make food appear where there was no money, provide us with educations. The phrase captures the sense that, when black women are able to succeed in systems that were never meant to accommodate them, it takes supernatural strength.

While the genesis of the phrase was political in ways that matter, it was also always teetering on the ledge of the sort of feel-good feminism that can be essentialist and counterproductive. Over time, black girl magic has run into tricky terrain. It has been gobbled up by the mainstream and has begun to privilege mainstream black women. In addition, inevitably, the advertising industry has been only too happy to capitalise on the trendiness of certain kinds of black women in ways that operate to depoliticise and deracinate what is worth saving in the idea of black girl magic.

And so we find ourselves in a moment in which the sort of black girl magic that is visible in popular culture is no longer subversive. Instead, the catch phrase too often celebrates only certain kinds of black women and, in so doing, essentialises what it means to be a black girl, and what magic ought to look like. Rather than the emancipatory arrogance that has helped oppressed people survive exploitation, black girl magic offers a smug and increasingly narrow celebration of black womanhood. Sadly, for many who remain on the fringes of even black womanhood itself — fat black women, transwomen, disabled black women, very dark-skinned black women, poor black women, queer black women, sex workers who are black women — the notion of magic simply doesn’t apply.

It is virtually impossible to be magical while navigating systems of power that are genuinely hostile to those who seek to resist them. So, for example, it is not evident in the hashtag movement whether or not the struggles of black women who survive welfare and criminal justice systems — and do not tweet about their troubles — qualify as black girl magic. Do those who survive physical abuse and continue to go to school, but are not straight A students make it onto the list of woman crushes?

Indeed, even for those who are included, those who are toasted for their magic, those — like Adichie, Beyoncé and actress Taraji B Henson — who have legions of fans sprinkling them with fairy dust, the idea of being magical has its burdens.

Many of the women who occupy the black girl magic spotlight have support systems. Women like Michelle Obama, Serena Williams and Henson — the faves of the black girl magic movement — are wealthy. They are public figures for whom having fans is a part of life. Still, because the rise of black girl magic has coincided with an explosion in celebrity culture and an intensification of the stan, these women find themselves in untenable positions — having to make choices and speak on behalf of people whose desires and dreams they will never know. This is at once the privilege and the quandary of being high profile. In addition, when they stumble — as Adichie has in a number of ways of late — the condemnation is harsh and swift. The fury aimed at black women is almost always disproportionate to the offence. Ironically, this paradox is precisely why stanning has become such an important, albeit double-edged, act of solidarity.
In “We should all be feminists”, Adichie (2012) argues: ‘Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage.’ She is right of course. It is also evident that black girl magic has come to function, if not as a cage, then certainly as a cave. Caves have their merits. They provide shelter from the elements and can offer privacy and spaces from which to recuperate. Still, caves can be dark, dank places because they seldom let in enough light.

We are living through a difficult global moment. There are many forces arrayed against the very people black girl magic was conjured to protect and defend. Perhaps it is time to accept that creating new possibilities doesn’t happen magically. The work of imaging new futures and shaping alternate trajectories does not belong to a few glammed up spokespersons. Maybe we need to accept that it is the stans who will change their own world – through their solidarity and organising and their critical intellect. This – much more than magic – will push our faves to be better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sisonke Msimang is a writer who probably tweets too much. Writer. Antipodean. Mama. Author of Always Another Country, Jonathan Ball. (October 2017) @Sisonkemsimang. This article was first published by Africa is a Country and is republished with permission.

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Introduction

Since the inception of *Sister Namibia*, the flagship magazine by the same name has afforded girls and women an opportunity to contribute articles reflecting how they negotiate and shape their lived realities. Even if the process of writing may not have been the form their negotiating took, they nonetheless relied on specific narratives that informed their negotiating. It is these narratives, captured by the articles published in *Sister Namibia*, that this article will explore.

As a platform that hosts various female voices, the magazine is an open invitation for women to share their lived realities in writing. These articles function to reveal how they made sense of things and negotiated different outcomes for themselves, but also function as instructional material for readers and enabling them to shape their realities in turn.

Of the 28 years of publications since the establishment of *Sister Namibia*, this article covers only the last 15 editions and specifically only a limited number of “I” stories. The rationale for this selection affords the current editor reflection on the contributions of women and girls whom she experienced first-hand. This will, hopefully, encourage other women to share their stories on such platforms and others alike.

A uniquely placed voice

A survey of existing Namibian magazines reveals that none are gender or youth specific. Instead, they concentrate on lifestyle, entertainment, fashion, entrepreneurship and especially politics. Similarly, regional newspapers, such as *Buchter News* (Luderitz), *The Caprivi Vision* (the Zambezi) and the *Namib Times* (the Coast), and language-specific papers such as *Oshili 24*, *Algemeine Zeitung* and *Republikein*, to mention a few, are not gender specific although they may dedicate certain pages to youth issues as does *The Namibian* and *Namibia Economist*. *Sister Namibia* is uniquely placed to invite the expression of gendered voices not otherwise covered in mainstream media.

The human stories covered in the magazine are diverse and convey values, beliefs, attitudes and social norms that, *Sister Namibia* wants to believe, can influence the shaping of readers’ perceptions and possibly their agency. This hope is based on arguments by scholars such as Adam Zachary Newton, Martha Nussbaum, Jami Carlacio and Noël Carroll, among others, who argue that people learn to behave, think and act from the characters and circumstances they meet in stories. While Namibian newspapers and magazines also carry human-interest stories, *Sister Namibia* is unique in its focus on women and issues regarding women and girls.

Based on Booth’s argument that “stories are our major moral teachers” (Carlacio, 2013, p. 130), it can be contended that writing as well as reading stories assist people in negotiating and shaping their lived realities. *Sister Namibia* aims to be a platform for women and girls to express themselves and to enable readers to understand themselves better and gain new perspectives from narratives of survival, courage and success. Relatable Namibian women and girls are covered in “I” stories and general feature articles. In addition to finding the language with which to understand one’s own experiences, readers are given alternative perspectives with which to question the status quo – especially when it is discriminating or harmful. The writing that proceeds from the magazine intends to empower the writer or teller as well as the reader.

“I” stories

The greatest number of “I” stories are told to the staff at *Sister Namibia*. Be it language
Sister Namibia hosts female voices and invites women to share their lived realities.

proficiency or the general sense of lacking writing skills, our contributors generally wish to tell their experiences and have them transcribed into written text by another.

In the articles, ‘Choosing a different life’, ‘The girl with an army in her mind’, and ‘If I had your baby’, one notices an outstanding characteristic: they each realise that the shape their lives will take depends on their accepting the responsibility for commitment to certain decisions. An omission would secure consequences they would prefer to avoid. By taking the steps they took, they chose the narrative of ‘I am able to foster my own difference’ over a passive ‘this is just the way things are’. The former narrative would be the decisive factor in steering them away from a predictable future that would resemble the realities of people in their communities.

The first article considered, tells the story of young Simone who realises her mother is trapped in a life of alcohol abuse and, as the daughter, she must make an adult decision for the benefit of herself and her younger brother (De Voss, 2013a, p. 8). This agency would see Simone remove herself from Dordabis, a village in central Namibia, to live in a children’s home in Windhoek. Soon, not only her brother, but also three cousins who longed to sleep peacefully and attend school unhindered would follow her. By telling herself she needs to help herself as her mother is incapable of doing so, Simone changed the course of her own life and that of four other children.

In ‘The girl with an army in her mind’ (De Voss, 2014a), the title clearly reveals the guiding principles of tenacity, ample enforcement and sheer strength of will. Conceived from a rape incident and facing major challenges, Marceline reveals her greatest desire was to educate herself and look after her family. Her beginning would not determine how she would live her life. She refused to become downtrodden and admit defeat despite the long distances she had to walk on an empty stomach, the sexual threats, the discrimination, or her limited options. Her motto was that ‘it does not matter how life treats you’, what matters is what you think of yourself. And what she thought of herself caused her to push back against all the odds as if she was a mighty force. Her story in Sister Namibia reveals challenges that would leave someone with less of a fighting spirit defeated. Yet her attitude inspires and speaks to readers who share a similar reality. Marceline has since gone on to study through a prestigious university in South Africa and went on to become a lecturer at one of the tertiary institutions in Namibia.

Today she is an advocate and acting judge in the High Court of Namibia; yet this future was not always foreseeable for Natasha Bassingthwaite. In ‘If I had your baby’, (De Voss Links, 2015) Bassingthwaite reveals her dilemma to comply with a cheating boyfriend’s request to have his baby. Her story would have been no different to that of many girls who wish to fix a relationship and thereby complicate their own prospects. As it was in her mind’s eye, she wrote the story of that future and recognised the madness of not ending such a relationship. The reality she enjoys today should inspire many young readers who may face similar invitations.

Unlike the previous three articles, the following five articles involve dealing with sexual and/or gender-based violence (GBV). Sharing these articles functioned as therapy for the girls – for some more than for others – and, in addition to the release it brought them, the stories were also instructional for young women in romantic relationships and for parents or guardians of young girls who are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

‘Child of the gemsbok’ (De Voss, 2014b) is a story of incest justified with the words, ‘In our culture’. Two attempted suicides and horrific sexual abuse describe the experiences of the girl whose name in her language means ‘child of the gemsbok’ (oryx). Despite her shattered existence and being plagued by a desire for death, she realised she needs to find the will to overcome her demons. She decided that telling her story will give her an anchor. She realised that speaking out will help her reject death and reach for life. The child of the gemsbok reflected that, having survived her life thus far, she can continue to do
Various people argue that people learn to behave, think and act from the characters and circumstances they meet in stories. While Namibian newspapers and magazines also carry human-interest stories, Sister Namibia is unique in its focus on women and issues regarding women and girls.

so. It is this narrative of willpower and determination that helps her negotiate her way through the dark days.

The women and girls in the aforementioned articles draw strength from various metaphors and narratives of either a past or a future self. Indeed, the same is true for Lizette who left an abusive six-year-long relationship – not by simply considering the abuse she suffered – but by the reminder of what it was like to be happy. ‘My name is Lizette’ (Feris, 2014, pp 17‑19), she recounts her feelings changing from bliss to shock to condemning, Lizette explains:

“He was abandoned and then emotionally and physically abused as a boy. His dad was absent. His mom took several boyfriends. I felt extremely sad for William and almost felt that I should make up for some of his hurt. I felt responsible for him and his life” (p. 18).

The narrative that kept her returning to her abusive boyfriend was the excuses she made to justify her reality in favour of William’s past. This article perhaps best articulates the power of the stories we tell ourselves and their impact on how we negotiate matters in our lives.

It was a Friday afternoon, and I was alone at the office, when a young student came to collect a copy of Sister Namibia. After we exchanged a few remarks about how much she appreciated that we deliver magazines to her workplace, ‘Precious’ looked me straight in the eye and asked, with a very serious tone, ‘If there is a ditch in the road, will people not make an effort to stop and warn others of the dangers ahead?’ My response was, ‘Of course. Who would not?’ She hesitated and then confessed she actually did not come to pick up a magazine. She came to ask if she could share her story and warn those mothers who do not know their daughters are being molested in the room next to them. I eventually spoke to her therapist, and we agreed that although speaking out enabled healing for her, she was a minor and it would be best for the magazine to protect her identity. ‘Precious’ wanted to share her story so that it did not become the story of others. Given the confusion, the sense of guilt, and the seeming inability to articulate the experience, ‘Precious’ argues that adults should be well informed of the signs of abuse and help a child imprisoned by terrible experiences that are tearing them apart. She did not know how to negotiate herself out of the circumstances she found herself in but, by speaking out, she wanted her article, ‘I am Precious’ (De Voss, 2014c) to keep other young children safe in the houses of their parents and guardians.

A story carrying a similar sense of responsibility appeared in the December 2016 edition. ‘Accepting shame’ (Anonymous, 2016) was written by a young woman who was four years old when a family member interfered with her. She somehow found the courage to tell her mother what happened, but the consequences were devastating for the family. The narrative she needs to keep on repeating is, ‘It was NOT MY FAULT!’ because shame and self-loathing have infected her life. Her writing after 30 years of emotional instability came from a decision to rip open the wounds that she had only covered with shame and truly begin to heal. She concludes her piece with the following words:

“No woman should feel the weight of self-loathing and depression that I felt throughout my life. As difficult as this story is to tell, if it prevents one instance of sexual abuse, I know I will be a little closer to being less broken” (Anonymous, 2016, pp 4-5).

While surviving abuse shapes some to become advocates for protecting others, some women, like Julien Cloete: ‘Stofbakkies se blom’ [the flower of Stofbakkies] (De Voss Links, 2016) set out in pursuit of success and enjoyment of life to overcome the darkness threatening their self-worth. Julien is deaf in one ear. Late in high school, Julien was sexually abused in their home by a close family member. She has since been diagnosed with clinical depression and has tried to commit suicide twice already. She calls herself brown. Calling herself brown refers to the fact that she is professionally successful despite her colour, which links to her poor upbringing, cultural lack of role models and how different her outlook on life and pursuits are compared to that of her racial peers. Julien’s narrative is, ‘So yes, I am a brown disabled woman, but this does not have to limit me in any way’ (p. 18).

The April-June 2017 edition carries the story of Laina, entitled ‘The blue baby’ (Katiti, 2017). Laina is the only person who directly mentions using writing as a means of making sense of her life and overcoming the trauma she has experienced. Born prematurely, suffering from a lack of oxygen, and turning blue has imprinted in her mind the idea that her sexual orientation must have been distorted at this time. After failing pregnant from rape, and being ridiculed by her community for being a pregnant lesbian, Laina attempts suicide, but she eventually discovers purpose and love when her daughter is born. Through writing, she articulates the reshaping of her life at key points – finding out what happened at her own birth and her search for reasons for her sexual orientation as well as the birth of her daughter.

Not all our stories are as sad, however. Indeed, a comment from a reader after reading the GBV edition of January-March 2014 was that the magazine creates the impression that being a woman is one long traumatising experience. The April-June edition covered 25 years of legal reform, which may not exactly have been a spirited celebration of
womanhood, but the milestones reached were certainly significant contributors towards it. We have since combined the sweet and the bitter to present a balanced view of the diverse experiences of gendered existence. Volume 27(2) focused on cultures and the piece ‘A symphony of cultures’ (Peace Corps Volunteer, 2015) was published with comments from women across the country expressing their likes and dislikes regarding their culture and specifically its impact on them as women.

The section ‘Women in business’ appeared in various issues and one issue in 2015 was specifically dedicated to this topic (Vol. 27(4)). *Sister Namibia* covered the triumphs of numerous women who credit their success, tenacity and perseverance to their being female and or mothers. Colette Rieckert, the managing director of Windhoek Gymnasium Private School, attributes people believing in her vision to build a prestigious school to the fact that she is a mother, which inspires confidence in investors to entrust her with funds to do good to their children. She maintains that:

“As women we’ve got a power that men would like to have and that is to have empathy with the people around us, to understand their hearts and make them understand our hearts. And that is an ability that has opened a lot of doors [and pockets] for me in the past and I believe it will continue to do so. When people understand your heart and they know your ethics... they open up and try to do what they can to help you achieve that” (De Waal, 2015, p. 25).

Like Colette, another woman who values heart and ethics is the cover lady of the October-December 2013 edition (Vol. 25(4)), Jakobine Rhom. Suffering abuse and neglect at the hands of her mother’s sisters, Jakobine would go on to care more for others than her own pocket and so, not only did she establish a renowned travelling choir in her community that gave hope and purpose to numerous children living in poverty, she secured a steady job and is thus able to support even more people (De Voss, 2013b). Another common narrative shared is that of motherhood. As Colette and Laila did, Noreen Arangies (De Voss, 2014d) similarly discovered her purpose of becoming a writer when she became a mother. While entertaining made-up stories with her son, she soon realised she could teach him moral values by telling him stories that build his character. She would eventually write and publish these stories.

The tenacity of women covered in *Sister Namibia* is found in those who achieve success as did Colette, but also in those like Lizelle Jacobs (Vol. 27(4)). Despite being confined to a wheelchair, Lizelle runs her own beauty salon. Likewise, Asteria Nandago, who hails from Okaku-Kiipupu, went from knock-knocking on doors to seek clients to owning her own hair salon (Gaoes, 2015). Other stories of determined women include that of Marinda Stein (Vol. 26(4)), from the dusty town of Keetmanshoop, who went on to become a film director, scooping up theatre and film awards in Namibia and in Africa. They also include Laimi Mbangula (textile artist), Lize Ehlers (musician), Lila Swanepoel (videographer and filmmaker), Melisa Poulton (fashion designer), Rika Nel (artist), Sandy Rudd (theatre director and producer), Saara Ndinela Nekomba (visual artist), Trixie Munyama (dancer and choreographer), Martha Mukaiwa (writer), and Senga Brockerhoff (actress and singer) as covered in Volume 29(1) (Levey-Swain, 2017). These are women who did not focus on where they came from or whether there was support for them or not. They pursue their passion and inspire it in others.

A final story worth mentioning is that of Bilqees. In ‘Breaking free for freedom’ (De Voss, 2015), Bilqees does the unthinkable: she runs away from her family to be able to enjoy sunsets and nature, simple things which she could not do under highly oppressive circumstances. She ran away to be able to choose
what to do with her life and not to be oppressed by her father, religion or culture. The bravery in the heart of this woman to choose who and how her life will be shaped is simply remarkable. And, through sharing these stories, *Sister Namibia* hopes to light the fire in many hearts.

**Conclusion**

The October-December edition of 2016 was exclusively dedicated to ‘I’ stories. Many anonymous authors were featured because of the sensitivity of the stories shared. The articles on the lives of these women reveal how their thinking and actions have shaped their lives and the narratives they believed in which helped them negotiate their own willpower and emotions, and convince themselves not to give up and accept ‘fate’ or abuse. Their free expression in *Sister Namibia* hopefully functions as inspiration, and they are role models offering hope for readers sharing similar dreams or trauma. In addition to the personal stories, the information shared in the magazine includes advice on human rights, helpful contact information, and DIY articles. *Sister Namibia* thus endeavours to be a kind of go-to or toolkit to assist readers with negotiating matters in their lives towards empowerment.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Vida de Voss Links** was appointed the director of *Sister Namibia* in September 2013. With this responsibility she also became editor of *Sister Namibia* magazine, a quarterly publication with a print run of 6000. Having been a lecturer of English literature and a semi-professional photographer, working on the magazine was a dream come true for her. Getting married in 2015 and giving birth to their son in 2017 opened up a new dimension of womanhood and enabled Vida to relate to children and women in a deeper and richer manner. The future of the child and the meaning of youth now inform much of her thinking and advocacy.

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Who belongs and who does not? Who has fought for human rights and who has not? Who participates in civic engagement and democratic practice and who does not? Afrobarometer, in its report ‘Does Less Engaged Mean Less Empowered?’ (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016), argues that youths are becoming less engaged in political activities across the continent and are less likely than their elders to be involved in civic activities, including attending community meetings, registering to vote and voting. Even more worrying, according to the report, is that young women are significantly less interested in citizen engagement than young men.

What are the form, content and nature of struggles across the continent and how have youths challenged the dominant narratives that have shaped and sustained hegemonic power structures throughout history? It may be that youths are not that visible in conventional civic activism, but that is not to say they are not using other forms to engage with the questions of the day and express alternative visions and futures. This paper will interrogate the use of theatre as a vehicle for struggle and will analyse why theatre sometimes generates fierce and strong opposition from states, capitalism and other interest groups. A critical question to explore is, ‘If theatre is effective and empowering for groups such as youth, to what extent is it an open space for women, especially young women?’

Black African resistance theatre

The young artist Ingoapele Madingoane, who was a member of the Mhlothi Black Theatre, was part of the disenchanted youth of 1976 South Africa who took to the arts to express their disgust with Bantu Education which painted Africans as inferior people who should be grateful to the ‘civilising mission’ of colonialists and the apartheid regime. Madingoane wrote and used to perform on stage and on the streets his poem, Africa My Beginning. With his strong and evocative voice, he drew many people to his recitals which adopted a traditional praise-singing style that people in black communities in South Africa and beyond could easily identify with. With a dramatical sway of hands, and moving from one point to the other, he thundered with a defiant message of African unity, even in the face of insurmountable opposition:

In Africa my beginning/ And Africa my ending... Until Africa was respected/ For a leader had emerged From the bush to Maputo/ Viva Frelimo Africa my beginning/ And Africa my ending I remember Ja Toivo/ Namibia is not lost Nujoma is not idle he’d be coward if he was (Madingoane, 1979).

Hope springs eternal in his recitations that are a clarion call for those in the audience, and those who would later read or listen to his performance, to believe that their fight against an oppressive system would be rewarded in the end. He drew inspiration from struggles elsewhere in Southern Africa to inspire the revolution and challenge apartheid in South Africa. The lamentation is one of identifying with the place and taking a stand of not moving, whatever the odds. He laid bare the avenues of capitalist expansion and tackled what are now termed illicit financial flows long before it became well known and certainly long before it was brought to light in the detail of the Panama Papers:

Suckers of my country They laid their sponges Flat on the soil and absorbed its resources To fill their coffers (Madingoane, 1979).

Africa My Beginning became popular during South Africa’s struggle and was recited by other theatre groups in their different spaces.
The poem and the performances accompanying it addressed the situation of oppression and became a counter-narrative to the cultural hegemony that the apartheid system was trying to impose. This was part of the defiant youths of the 1970s recreating language, using traditional praise singing styles and performance to overturn a narrative of inferiority and to shout for dignity in the struggle. Apart from that, *Africa My Beginning* has to be understood against the background of calls for the total liberation of Africa from white minority rule and colonialism. Poetry, theatre and theatricals were used for mobilisation and conscientisation.

In his preface to *Writers in Politics*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1981) says that ‘every writer is a writer in politics, the question is whose politics.’ The point is that the writer or artist pushes the point of a particular interest group in society. More importantly, creative works show that life is not static and recognise the continuity of life embodied in social struggles. In South Africa, quite apart from people taking up arms, youths also used theatre as part of the ammunition for fighting for cultural and political change. The role of theatre in the struggle was recognised by no less than the ANC, through its two propaganda projects *Mayibuye* and *Amandla*. The two groups were at the heart of the ANC’s international anti-apartheid struggle and were strong ambassadors for ANC’s external propaganda. The performances of these two agitprop groups incorporated dance music and theatre to explain the ANC’s cause in the fight for liberation. It is, therefore, not surprising that the apartheid regime viewed arts, including theatre, as a threat to state security and was wont to charge those involved. At the Black People’s Convention Trial of 1975, the arrested were accused of having committed a grievous crime which included the following serious charges: ‘plotting to make, produce, publish or distribute subversive and anti-white utterances, writings, poems, plays and or/dramas’ (from Attorney General’s Report, 1975, cited in Steadman, 1998, p. 63).

In Rhodesia, Owen Seda bemoans how the settler society was domineering and wanted to impose its values. Theatre was thus ‘contrasted with the lives of indigenous people who were regarded as uncivilised and without culture’ (Seda, 2004, p. 137). According to Seda, this state of affairs was not helped by the fact that a colonial establishment in the name of the National Theatre Organisation continued to sponsor and finance white amateur theatre companies. It was in this context that a youthful group, Amakhosi Theatre Productions in Bulawayo, directed by Cont Mhlanga emerged providing: ‘an honest assessment of (newly) independent Zimbabwe’s varied and contentious attitude towards racial integration and social transformation’ (ibid). In 2007, Amakhosi’s *The Good President* play was banned in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. This satirical play, written by Cont Mhlanga and produced by Daves Guzha, is about an old woman who wants to vote but also wants to assess her president by talking to her grandson. The play looks at Zimbabwe since independence in 1980 and interrogates the period immediately after independence in which an estimated 20 000 people (Ngwenya & Harris, 2015) were killed by a crack army unit established by the dictator Robert Mugabe. Those who were killed were largely in the southern parts of Zimbabwe and were targeted because of their perceived support for the opposition leader at the time, Joshua Nkomo.

Issues discussed in the play (*The Good President*) include corruption, state-sanctioned violence and presidential misconduct. The play was performed in Harare, Zimbabwe, to a full house for the two weeks that it ran. At the end of each performance, the actors would engage with the audience on the issues raised in the play. There was stinging criticism of the state by the audience in the discussions, so much that, rather than deal with the message, the state decided to deal with the messenger and stop further performances in Bulawayo. In scenes reminiscent of the days of the Rhodesian regime, police were present in numbers for the opening night of the play in Bulawayo. They ordered that the performance could not go on as it was not a play, but a political gathering. Without any hint of irony, they used the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), to stop the play on the grounds that it had not sought police clearance. When Zimbabwe received independence in 1980, the government had retained this piece of legislation (the POSA) which had also been used by the Rhodesian regime under Ian Smith to suppress the nationalist threat and maintain his hold on power. This draconian law, often used to arrest members of the opposition parties in independent Zimbabwe, was now being unleashed on playwrights and their actors. Zimbabwe’s Deputy Minister of Information and Publicity Bright Matonga could not be any clearer on stakes at play:

> “The play is not of any national value. It seeks to stir emotions and hate with the ulterior motive to see President Mugabe out of power. It undermines the person of the President” (Kwidini, 2007)

The minister was accusing the actors and the producers of the play of pushing a regime change agenda. Avner Zis in *Foundations of Marxist Aesthetics* argues that:

> “Art always confronts man with concrete facts taken from life, with events and experiences. Each artistic image is either a concrete depiction of certain phenomena from the real world or an expression of specific events in man’s life” (Zis, 1977, p. 80)
Actors, writers and any other artists, according to Zis, should stick to artistic truth which is life’s truth artistically interpreted. A salient feature of artistic truth is that it wants to gain insight into, and describe fully, the processes of thinking and imagining the future taking place in life. It does so without being overly concerned about the consequences of its depiction. True to form, Cont Mhlanga does not entertain thoughts of censoring himself boldly declaring that:

*I will not rewrite the play. How can a play based on true historical events and incidents and on knowledge in the public domain be unlawful?... It seems what is unlawful in this country is to speak the truth, even if all the facts are there for everybody to see,’ he said. ‘Self-expression is a human right that no one, not even the state, has the right to take away. If I am going to change anything else in my script, it will probably be the punctuation marks (Kwidini, 2007).

For Mhlanga and his youthful cast, confrontation with the Thought Police was nothing new. A year earlier, he had a brush with state security personnel for another play *Pregnant with Emotion*. In this political satire, a child refuses to be born because it is not confident that it will be able to cope with the economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. Boal explains this kind of theatre as follows: ‘The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it’ (Boal, 2000, p. 122). Amakhosi Theatre Productions is about township theatre and the issues that are of concern to people in townships. Theatre becomes the location for resistance and for challenging the status quo.

One of the most memorable lines from Shakespeare’s works comes from the play, *King Henry IV Part 2*: ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.’ A leader, for example, a king, has too many responsibilities, is constantly worried and, as a result, fails to sleep soundly. It would seem that some leaders and their governments are sufficiently worried to consider banning theatre because of the ‘sleepless nights’ that it gives them.

The banning of theatre or some plays is not unique to Southern Africa. Events elsewhere in the world, such as Hungary, Iraq and Belarus, make it clear that theatre is considered dangerous.

**Nanzikambe’s resistance theatre in Malawi**

Nanzikambe from Malawi is another example of a leading youth drama organisation using theatre to explore issues of governance, health and climate change. The group have previously given a touching performance of Jack Mapanje’s incarceration by the Malawi government. Mapanje was imprisoned without trial in 1987, and a large campaign for his release soon ensued. He was only released in 1991 and, while in prison, he composed the poems in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuvu Prison* (1993) as well as most of the poems in *Skipping without Ropes* (1998). The play *Crocodiles are Hungry at Night* by Nanzikambe seeks to portray what happened to Mapanje before and after his imprisonment and raises critical questions about dignity, freedom and the fight for justice during a dark period of Malawi’s history.

A consistently contentious issue in Africa’s development is around the management of natural resources. Although Africa is rich in natural resources, very few countries have been able to ensure that these resources are utilised to support national growth and development. Many countries rich in natural resources waste the wealth ‘enriching a minority, while corruption and mismanagement leave the majority impoverished’ (Shultz, 2005, p.7). An abundance of natural resources is ideally supposed to provide economic opportunities for a country to develop and prosper, yet most naturally rich countries are neither growing faster nor performing better than those with fewer resources (Tsikl, 2003).

Countries rich in natural resources have very poor people. This problem is referred to as a
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How people relate with one another and how they tackle the contentious issues of the day and how they dream is all part of theatre. Through art, the opportunity for civic engagement is expanded.

‘resource curse’ (Warner, 2001) and it is also known as ‘the paradox of plenty’ (Karl, 1997). Nanzikambe has not been shy to challenge and pose tough questions on the issues of oil exploration in Malawi. Through their play, Presidential Prerogative, they bring the story of a village that sits on top of oil deposits that have attracted government’s attention. In the story, the village resists attempts by the government to relocate them so as to pave the way for companies to extract oil. The oil deposits are a potentially double-edged sword as they may bring substantive long-term benefits for socioeconomic transformation in the country. On the other hand, the deposits may destabilise the village and the country, threaten livelihoods, cause environmental damage, and lead to contested resettlements and displacements. The resistance to the relocation invites the audience to interrogate the dilemma of development and conflict around extractives. The play by this youthful cast shows the important role of theatre in dealing with the issues of equity, corruption, inequality and justice. The play lays bare the crooked schemes elected leaders apply in manipulating local communities for personal benefit and, in the process, shows how the extractives sector is captured by the political and business elite to the detriment of development.

Women in African theatre

Returning to the original question on the extent to which theatre – as an effective vehicle to use in subverting dominant narratives – is an open space for women, especially young women, to express alternative narratives, we can now look at a body of research from various African countries which gives some important pointers. The book Meet the Zambian Women Theatre Artists (Tembo, 2013) has stories told by women theatre artists from Zambia over a period of eight years. It provides an overview of the context and challenges that women involved in theatre in Zambia face. They complain of the uneven playing field which is dominated by men, and they also bemoan the lack of female playwrights. They question the centrality of male characters in scripts and advocate for a change in the role of women in drama. For example one interviewee, Matilda Malamamfumu speaks about how when she joined Tikwiza Theatre, she was the only woman in a group with six men. Another issue that is raised is ‘the problem of men wanting to have sex with young actresses’ (ibid, p.3). The attitude seems to be that female actors are there for the taking. Anne Katamanda complains about how she was not cast for various roles that she believed she was good for because an impression was given that ‘you can only make it if you use bottom power’ (ibid, p74). The term ‘bottom power’ implies granting sexual favours. One of the interviewees Mulenga Kapewpe bemoans the lack of labour protection for artists in general and women in particular pointing out that there is little money in theatre. This implies that theatre cannot be regarded as fulltime employment. Yet actors like Malamamfumu have refused to let the challenges facing women theatre artists bring them down. She has written and co-directed plays one of them being the bluntly titled Violence against Women a one woman act show where she is ‘wife, husband, daughter, stage manager, politician, director and producer’ (ibid, p.21)

The issues in the book have a resonance with the concerns also raised in another book, African Theatre 14: Contemporary Women (Plastow, 2015). In Plastow’s book, Dalia Basiouny reflects on her journey to becoming a theatre director and argues that her approach to theatre cannot be divorced from being an active citizen in Egypt. Her play, Magic of Borolus, shows how the Egyptian society is not keen on taking anything considered new and ‘counter’ to its culture. The play shows an entire village opposed to the main character, Om Saada, because she goes out to the lake at night and she teaches other women in the village how to read. In the end, she is in trouble because of a rumour that she is practising witchcraft and the women are imprisoned. Performances of her play were staged during the uprising in Egypt that resulted in the fall of the dictator Muhammad Mubarak. Basiouny had to stop some of the performances and join the protests, living true to her words of being an artist and active citizen whose aspiration is to determine her own destiny (Plastow, 2015).

In African Theatre Contemporary Women, the journeys of Ethiopian actresses, either in theatre or film, are explored and examples are given of how marriage is not easy for actresses. The choice is either to remain single or marry a man in the same industry, although this is gradually changing. Actresses are still seen as vulgar and of little virtue (Plastow, 2015) – stereotypes that women artists are subjected to throughout Africa. It is difficult even for some women whose husbands are artists. Recently, Zimbabwean Tsitsi Gumbo, a recipient of Outstanding Theatre Actress for her sterling performance in the play Untikolotshi had to go through a painful divorce because of her career in the theatre (Ndlovu, 2017). Her husband who is an artist in his own right stopped her from going on stage.

I had a bad marriage as I was banned from acting or doing anything that had to do with the stage... He didn’t want me to be exposed or interact with people. Even though I assured him that I’d sign no kissing and no nudity clauses in whichever productions I was involved in, it still wasn’t enough (Gumbo, in Ndlovu, 2017).

After the divorce, Tsitsi decided to pursue her theatre dream and got a big role in Untikolotshi, for which she won an award in 2016.
The issue of voices in theatre cannot be over-emphasised and one of the problems is on the domination of male voices, whether by way of playwrights or by way of leading protagonists in plays who, most of the time, are men. There are plays though that buck the trend. Stitsha, written by Cont Mhlanga and produced by Amakhosi, tracks the journey of Thuli, a young woman fighting for recognition in a male-dominated world who decides to form her own theatre and dance group. Thuli is the only girl in her family, but is denied opportunities simply because she is a girl. She has a problem in both the private family space, where her father chooses a man for her to marry, and in the public space, where she is told she can only be a secretary and not the theatre director she wants to be. In one of the scenes, father, mother and daughter are discussing the play that Thuli is producing:

Thuli: The first act baba lo mama is about my mother here. Baba: What about her? Thuli: How money has torn a beloved from her. She is living 300 km away in the countryside. While you, Baba, is living somewhere in town trying to make money, not enough of it either. Baba: UThuli madoda [Thuli man]. These things are too serious mani. You can’t do anything about it. Ahaaaa. Nina: Thuli my child, you talk as if you know how much it burns me ngane yami [my child]. Your father umbona enje [as he is] can only manage to come once a month for twenty-four hours nje kuhela [only] (Mhlanga, cited in Lungu, 1997, p. 104).

In the few words exchanged we see a family in independent Zimbabwe, but still torn apart by the brutality inflicted by colonialism. The father has to leave his family in the countryside and go to the city to try and eke out a living, yet the money that he gets is not even enough to sustain his family. Life is depicted as unfair, and no amount of rationalisation can help with anything. This is aptly captured in the words of the dejected father who says: ‘These things are too serious mani. You can’t do anything about it.’ There has been very little change between colonial Rhodesia and independent Zimbabwe. Society has lost the capacity to determine its own destiny. Thuli’s brother is a powerful young man but, instead of bettering his life, he wants to bully his young sister. He is a frustrated youth who turns on someone physically weaker than him in the family. When Thuli’s mother speaks of her husband as only coming home once a month, and even then just for 24 hours, the whole concept of marriage is under the spotlight. What makes it worse is that the husband does not have a decent job, he has to constantly go to the city because the whole urban life and economy thrives on money yet, for all his toil he has nothing. Both Thuli’s father and brother have failed to have fulfilling and economically secure lives, but they are domineering figures who want to control what she does. Thuli refuses to conform to their gender stereotypes and is bent on dismantling their gender bias. In the end, Thuli stabs her brother, who has become a hindrance to her aspirations and success, and so has to go to prison. This tragic end is unfortunate, but Thuli should be seen as a youthful character at the forefront of inspiring dreams and disrupting and subverting stereotypes. It is important that theatre should have such strong roles for women as both protagonists and producers.

In his inaugural lecture: ‘Is literature a luxury?’ Arnold Kettle (1970) contends that ‘most good literature is revolutionary.’ The idea being that the artist, in a bid to depict happenings in society, tends to uncover the revolutionary spirit in society. Theatre as a creative method, therefore, becomes a way of understanding how a society should move. There is a relationship between art, human beings, history and imagining the future. How people relate with one another and how they tackle the contentious issues of the day and how they dream is all part of theatre.
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Art, the opportunity for civic engagement is expanded, and theatre has a central role in social transformation, but also in disrupting dominant narratives and envisioning new futures. At the centre of the drama enacted on the stage or on streets in the townships are youths who are challenging corruption, questioning inequality, spot-lighting governance, tackling patriarchy, and asking uncomfortable questions about the future of their being. This is all important because, as Boal (2000, p. 142) reminds us, ‘One knows how these experiments will begin, but not how they will end, because the spectator is freed from [their] chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist.’

And such is the power of theatre as political subversion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Percy F. Makombe works with OSISA as a Programme Manager for Natural Resources Governance. He has worked as a journalist for a number of publications including, Moto, Zimbabwe Independent, Mundo Negro and Africa News Bulletin. He holds an MPhil in development policy and practice from the University of Cape Town, an MA in globalisation and communications from the University of Leicester (UK), and a BA General degree from the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). He has previously attempted acting, and was part of the University of Zimbabwe cast in Who is Afraid of Nzarayebani, an adaptation of Nikolai Gogol’s Government Inspector. He also had a leading role in the Infidel.

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This article interrogates how art is being used to challenge the stereotype of women with disabilities. It explores the development of disability art from the social model of disability. Art can be used as a powerful medium, not only to challenge society’s attitude but also as a way of teaching young women about everyday issues where traditional methods of teaching are not appropriate (for whatever reason). The article also chronicles how organisations of deaf people and individuals in Zimbabwe are using art to achieve their objectives.

**Culture, art and disability**

Schein (1984) defines culture as a set of shared meanings that make it possible for members of a group to interpret and act upon their environment. Culture has different meanings to different people, and the meaning often depends on the context. Culture embodies what happened in the past, what is happening in the present, and what can happen in the future, and this can be expressed through various mediums such as everyday practices, dance, literature, and art (Psalia). Culture plays an important role in how individuals are placed within the society’s hierarchical structure. It is through culture that women and people with disabilities have been regarded as inferior. People with disabilities, irrespective of their gender, have often been perceived as being of little value (Deveney, 2004).

According to Tolstoy, art is an expression of a feeling or experience in such a way that the audience to whom the art is directed can share that feeling or experience. In a sense, art is a means of communication by which humans can communicate emotions and feelings.

Culture has a bearing on how art is interpreted in the society in which it is made. Art has often depicted women and people with disabilities as being inferior – more so for disabled people, whose role in art has often been to provide entertainment emanating from their impairments.

**Disabled imagery in mainstream art**

In mainstream arts, disability is generally portrayed in a negative light. Disabled people are often depicted in negative stereotypes as pitiable and pathetic (Barnes 1991). They are also represented as sinister and evil, or tragic but brave (Reiser and Mason 1992). These images of disability in the mainstream arts are not from disabled people themselves. Attitudes and representations of disabled people emanate from the societies that we live in, and what is considered normal. Culture plays an important role in determining what role or place in the hierarchy that individual people are ascribed.

Television is an important way in which people access popular culture, as it is widely accessible. The manner in which disabled people are portrayed on TV plays a big part in moulding attitudes of viewers towards disabled people (Psalia). This is especially important for those who do not have daily contact with disabled people. Unfortunately most television programming continues to project disabled people through stereotypical lenses (although this trend is changing). Because of its place in popular culture, television can be useful in conveying positive depictions of people with disabilities. The participation of people with disabilities in reality television series, according to MacKay (2013), can be used to show disabled people as being capable of independence and able to form and sustain relationships, a departure from the stereotypical projection of disabled people as being asexual and not unable to form relationships.
Art has often depicted women and people with disabilities as being inferior – more so for disabled people, whose role in art has often been to provide entertainment emanating from their impairments.

Disability art

According to Masified (2006:22) disability arts are art forms, art works, or art productions created by disabled people to be shared with and to inform other disabled people by focusing on the truth of disability experience. Disability arts have their roots in the Disabled People’s Movement, which was spurred on by the social model of disability in the 1970s, whose focus was on the rights of disabled people. As an emancipatory tool, disability art focuses on addressing the stereotypes of disability in mainstream arts. Eisenhauer (2007) notes that the Disability Arts Movement emphasises “the potential of disability arts as a progressive, emancipatory force at both the individual and social levels” (Barnes & Mercer, 2001, p 529). The driving force of the movement is therefore to cast new light on the issues of disability and how society understands disability.

Psalia says that the disability arts movement is driven by the need to make disability voices heard and to establish the right to show and express emotions and artistic capabilities. She notes that disabled people are still misrepresented and under-represented in mainstream arts, and as a result the disability narrative that is being told is not representative of disabled people themselves. Disability art focuses on creating change within societies, and challenges long-held beliefs and attitudes about disability.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) article 30 reads as follows:

1. States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:
   a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;
   b) Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;
   c) Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

Deaf art: using art for advocacy by deaf women in Zimbabwe

In deaf art, people express their deaf experience through visual art. Deaf art is firmly rooted in deaf culture, which holds deafness to be an experience and not merely a condition of being unable to hear. Deaf art is unique in that it uses Sign Language, which sets it apart from other forms of disability art. Deaf art (including theatre, drama, poetry, and dance) displays the array of visual richness of the various signed languages, and offers a glimpse into the life of deaf people – their fears and aspirations.

Deaf arts are also making their way into mainstream media, as shown by Marlee Matlin winning an Oscar for her lead role in the movie *Children of a Lesser God* (1987). Recently Nylie de Marco won both America’s Next Top Model and Dancing With the Stars, which shows how far deaf people and deaf arts have travelled.

Apart from its ability to entertain, deaf art is also used as a form of advocacy, like protest art. The deaf language is often marginalized, and through advocacy efforts the situation is beginning to change. Deaf women in Zimbabwe are also embracing art as a way of sharing their experience as Africans and as women.

Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust

The Deaf Art Festival, held for the first time in 2015, is a product of the Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust. The festival is a platform for deaf learners, girls and boys, to showcase their talent. It is currently the only platform that brings together deaf youths for performances on a national platform. Deaf learners put on performances (including poetry, drama, mime, and dance) that tackle issues such as sign language rights, access to sexual and reproductive health, and child marriages. Young deaf girls have presented on challenges with access to maternal health care due to communication barriers (particularly lack of Sign Language). The Deaf Arts festival feeds directly into Zwakala, a regional arts festival for deaf learners from Southern Africa that was held in South Africa. At Zwakala, deaf learners tackle issues such as xenophobia and regional unity through performing arts.

Previously deaf children from a local school for the deaf, in partnership with an arts organisation in Harare, produced a play titled “Cry Thinking” that explored the life of a young girl born deaf, and the challenges that she faced trying to make sense of her surroundings. The group toured Europe with the play, and managed to bring to the attention of society the challenges that young deaf girls face without a language to communicate with those around them, including their immediate families.

Another illustrative example of how arts provide scope to create counter narratives on deaf people’s lives is the initiative by Deaf Women Included (DWI), a grassroots deaf women’s organisation in Zimbabwe, which addresses gender-based violence (GBV) awareness among deaf women through the medium of drama. Literacy among deaf women is very low, so available materials on GBV are not accessible. DWI has produced a set of four DVD on issues of sexual, physical, economic and...
emotional abuse. The use of drama and Sign Language allows deaf adults and young deaf women to easily understand what GBV is and how it manifests. The dramas are being widely distributed and used in training among deaf women in Zimbabwe.

To counter negative narratives about deaf people and to raise awareness in the wider society about disability, Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust has also produced television programmes since 2012. Before then, deaf people did not have the opportunity to appear on television so negative stereotypes about disability prevailed. The programming, although not focusing exclusively on women with disabilities, allows young deaf women and those with other disabilities to tell their own narratives, and addresses issues such as gender-based violence, economic empowerment of women, and participation in political and social processes. The programme affords women with disabilities the opportunity to engage with society and to demand that their issues are brought to the table. The medium of television has the largest appeal to deaf women, as it allows them to convey messages in Sign Language.

Deaf people are often highly visual and the concept of art comes naturally to them because of Sign Languages (which utilises space). Art is used to educate and also as a means to encourage critical thinking, not only among deaf women but in society as a whole.

**Beauty Pageants**

Because disability has always been looked down on and pitied, it has not been associated with beauty. However, with the advent of the social model of disability, people have begun to question the stereotypical narratives of beauty. To assert their counter-narratives, disabled people have organised their own beauty pageants that celebrate the notion of diversity.

Beauty pageants are held at school level and at national level, and are usually aimed at building the confidence of young deaf women, preparing them for leadership roles in their communities. Kuda Mapeture, a young deaf woman who has represented Zimbabwe at an international beauty pageant, has inspired many other young deaf girls who have realised that they are capable of representing the country and being ambassadors in their own right. More of such stories need to be told in our societies to counter the narratives of beauty being associated with the “able bodied”. Kuda is now working with young deaf girls in areas of gender-based violence and empowerment. These stories are of great inspiration to young deaf women, who need role models.

Deaf people, both women and men, are excelling in many fields of art, including modeling, singing, and dancing, and this is helping to raise awareness about deafness and at the same time raising the profile of deaf people in society. Disabled women can take advantage of such developments to advance their agenda, and making society more aware about the issues that they want to be addressed.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Disability art has come a very long way in Zimbabwe and all over the world, a renaissance that started in the 1970s. It is portraying disabled people in the way that they want, and not the usual dominant projection of disabled people in popular culture. Disability art has helped to project disabled people as humans with aspirations.

Feminism and the disability rights movement share a lot in common as they are both grounded on the principle that the personal is political. Disability art can be used to challenge the stereotypes of disabled women and to raise awareness about important issues among women with disabilities.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lovemore Chidemo is a cofounder of the Zimbabwe Deaf Media Trust. He is the Producer of Action Power, a magazine program on national TV in Sign Language in Zimbabwe. His interests include Sign Language, Deaf arts and literature. Lovemore is deaf.

Agness Chindimba is a founder and Director of Deaf Women Included in Zimbabwe. She is a Mandela Washington Fellow, passionate about young women with disabilities and would like to see disability mainstreamed into feminist movements. Agness is deaf.

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IMAGES OF DISABILITY: How women with disabilities use art to fight negative stereotypes
“The only thing that separates women of colour from anyone else is opportunity”
Viola Davis.

Tsitsi Dangarembga is the founder of the African Women Filmmakers hub, a pan-African platform that provides space for African women filmmakers to tell women’s stories in a manner that counters the negative narratives currently dominant in film. Such is her passion for women filmmakers that in September 2016 this women’s hub was born. She says:

Despite the existence of laws and protocols that have been promulgated and signed by many African governments that promote women’s empowerment, African women continue to be challenged by inequalities and marginalisation both in the private and public spheres.

One way in which this inequality is maintained in society is through the narratives that are available in the public domain:

Of these narratives the audio-visual medium is the most powerful due to its nature that mimics reality. The audio-visual medium is also gaining in influence through its use in social media that are now a part of everyday life in almost all communities. Such popular culture has become a high-impact source of public narrative, particularly in the case of youthful populations, marginalised populations, and less educated populations. These groups constitute the majority of African populations, and women constitute a large part of such groups. Women in such popular narratives are too often represented as powerless stereotypes, which reinforces the powerlessness and marginalisation that women experience in society.

This was the deep concern in Tsitsi’s heart, and she was personally convicted of the urgent need for a space for women to be represented, because (despite all her achievements as a female filmmaker) she struggled to get stories that she felt were important produced.

In 1996 she was commissioned by Media for Development Trust to co-write and direct a long HIV development fiction film, Everyone’s Child. She has not had the opportunity to direct a long feature since then, twenty one years down the road, even though her signature short, the prize-winning Kare Kare Zvako (2004) went to the competition at Sundance in 2005 and other notable festivals (including Claremont Ferrand in France). It was subsequently acquired by National Geographic. She graduated from the German Film and Television Academy with distinction, and was one of 20 students accepted from 1200 applications from all over the world. In 2009/2010 she was commissioned by UNFPA to do another HIV story in three parts, which was then cut together into another feature. Apart from the short, she has not been able to make films that tell the stories that she finds important.

In 2003, Tsitsi founded a women’s film festival in Zimbabwe, hoping that it would give women a platform to launch an African women’s filmmaking engagement. She explains:

We are struck by the absence of films by African women when we do our programming. Responses include “too African” or “too Zimbabwean”, as the money generally comes from outside the country. Or else NGOs often want narratives that reflect issues rather than lived realities”.

The gap had to be closed, and women had to rise up and tell their own stories, so in September 2016 Tsitsi held a meeting with eleven participants from various parts of Africa to help establish her brainchild of the
Young female filmmakers in Africa grow up in a less repressive environment than earlier generations. At the same time they are assaulted by the current pop culture so easily accessible through the internet, so they may have greater difficulty disentangling their authentic selves.

African women’s film hub. There were three participants from West Africa (representing Ghana, Cote D’Ivoire and Senegal), three from East Africa (representing Tanzania, Kenya and Rwanda), and two from Southern Africa (representing Zimbabwe and Malawi). A guest from the third Southern African country was unable to attend as she was unable to confirm the programme that she was to introduce in time. ICAPA is currently in discussion with Zambian filmmaker and festival director, Jessie Chisi.

The participants were Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Joyce Chavula (Malawi), Laurene Mana Abdallah (Ghana), Ella Liliane Mutuyimana (Rwanda), Angele Diabang (Senegal), Edwige Dro (Cote D’Ivoire), Wilson Rumisha (Tanzania), Wizzy Mangoma (Zimbabwe), Kudzai Chimbaira (Zimbabwe), Matrid Nyagah (Kenya), and Shadreck Chikoti (Malawi). In the case of Tanzania a male representative was invited, as ICAPA had not been able to identify an upcoming female filmmaker in that country. In the case of Malawi, Shadreck Chikoti provided support for actress turned filmmaker Juoyce Chavula. Zimbabwean actress Kudzai Chimbara is currently resident in Sweden.

At this meeting four themes were identified.

1. perspectives (new female perspectives are needed)
2. politics (story-telling is about power – the powerless cannot tell their stories and thus cannot have an impact on people)
3. change (changing narratives leads to change in society)
4. balance (women’s stories are seldom told, although the women-to-men sex ratio globally is approximately 1:1).

The two-day meeting is what led to the launch of the African women filmmakers’ hub (AWFH). For Tsitsi, The women’s hub is timely and has been an 11-year labour of love and, along the way, the story has been shortened, lengthened, shortened again, edited, reworked and pummelled into shape. I don’t take any of it for granted. When we didn’t produce it years ago, I never forgot the story and the potential it had to grow, but I firmly believe in God’s perfect timing. The time is now for this story, and I am excited to hear and discuss diverse interpretations from different fora. Above all, I am grateful to have been listened to and trusted to create something worthwhile by the African women filmmakers’ hub.

The hub assists and encourages women filmmakers to create continental networks and collaborations in producing more films. Due to their marginalisation, African women filmmakers have generally not been able to gain access to regional and international industry platforms and resources. Women filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ) representatives at the 2016 edition of the Gothenburg International Film Festival had the opportunity to attend a panel on Nollywood. All the directors on this panel were men and the only African woman was a casting director. Even though that particular industry is growing economically and enjoying international recognition, women are not adequately represented, and are not enjoying the economic benefits of the growing industry.

The African women’s Filmmakers hub hopes to bridge that gap. They have had programmes tailor-made to inspire women and women’s stories, and held a scriptwriters residency in Dakar In September 2017, with writers from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Uganda, Benin and Kenya. The Hub also launched its first production, In My Father’s Village, with a world premiere screening at the Durban International Film Festival 2017 in July (and a Zimbabwean premiere in August).

The film’s director, Tapiwa Kapuya, who was the first winner and beneficiary of the ICAPA Trust and African women filmmaker’s hub project shares her experience on working on this film:

I have many emotions about this film being made. Firstly, I am overwhelmed that the story has resonated with so many people. It shows me that we are all connected to something that was portrayed. I am so humbled by the people who worked on this project alongside me. This has been an 11-year labour of love and, along the way, the story has been shortened, lengthened, shortened again, edited, reworked and pummelled into shape. I don’t take any of it for granted. When we didn’t produce it years ago, I never forgot the story and the potential it had to grow, but I firmly believe in God’s perfect timing. The time is now for this story, and I am excited to hear and discuss diverse interpretations from different fora. Above all, I am grateful to have been listened to and trusted to create something worthwhile by the African women filmmakers’ hub.

Other projects in the pipeline for the hub include a short film to be shot in Kenya, currently pre-production. “We are now sourcing funding for the five-year plan, which is a comprehensive programme of networking, training (theoretical and on the job), production, master classes and mentoring” says Tsitsi. The hub has also conducted a post-production workshop in Zimbabwe and a pre-production and scriptwriting workshop in Kenya (in 2016).
The women filmmakers’ hub is passionate about young women filmmakers, as they are the future. Tsitsi believes that young female filmmakers have some advantages and some disadvantages:

As women assert their right to be, and not to be discriminated against, young female filmmakers in Africa grow up in a less repressive environment than earlier generations. At the same time they are assailed by the current pop culture so easily accessible through the internet, so they may have greater difficulty disentangling their authentic selves from the many false representations they are exposed to. To be a filmmaker, you have to find your own authentic voice, so a successful journey of disentanglement can be a source of strength. At the end of the day, it is important for them to have mentoring and resourcing from women who have been there themselves, and not always to have to look outside the continent for this. Finally, we find that the sector is feminised in countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya, where it is not capitalised, and that it is male-dominated in countries like South Africa and Egypt, where it is capitalised. This is how the feminisation of poverty persists into the film industry. Young African women filmmakers are going to have to contend with this feminisation of poverty in the film industry also. We want AWFH to stand for them against this feminisation of poverty in the industry.

One other thing the hub does for women filmmakers is administrative work. Filmmakers generally and understandably don’t want to do administration. They want to make their films and have platforms for the exhibition of their films. The hub provides that facility for African Women Filmmakers by doing the administration and facilitating training and production.

The African women filmmaker’s hub is tried and tested, even if it is new. The founder has long been on the same mission, with a vision for women in Film in Africa:

We have had past experiences from which we have learnt and grown. As the founder of AWFH, my first project was the women’s film festival, the International Images Film Festival for Women. That was meant to build up a platform for women filmmakers on the continent, and also keep them in touch with developments in the film industry in general. The idea had always been to develop this platform into a production platform as well, since we can’t exhibit African women’s films if we are not producing them. It took a decade and a half and a grant from the EU ACP cultures + programme in 2013 to enable us to build the festival platform to the level where we could start the next step of the production and capacitating platform. That step was made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

The hub has big dreams and big plans for women, and for women’s stories across the continent.

So far The AWFH has been engaged in a series of activities. The five-year programme establishes a continental headquarters, regional headquarters, and national chapters. These will be actual physical spaces where African women filmmakers can use resources such as the on-line film library, and take advantage of the mentoring platform for development. In the first five years, scripts developed by members will be used in the training and production activities. After that, the African Women’s Film Fund will continue enabling women to do their work. We are also establishing ties to African television stations as a further way of resourcing African Women’s Films and ensuring their exposure. Further exposure is from engagement with African women’s film festivals on the continent.

There really is a hunger for women filmmakers to get their stories made, if the applications that the women’s hub receives are anything to go by. For the Senegal residency call, they received 134 English language submissions and 36 French. They then long-listed 22 of these, and made a final selection of 11 projects, eight in English and three in French. Tsitsi explains the process:

We are in the process of feeding back to all the long-listed projects. Some have not been invited to the residency, but because the projects showed promise, they are still working with the founder on the
development. One of the aims of the residency is to close the gap between francophone and anglophone filmmakers. We will also provide language lessons in French and English for those who wish. The success of the call was due to our partnership with Writivism, a Ugandan continental literature festival. It helped us reach people we might not have reached. We have the wonderful result that one Nigerian writer who was shortlisted for the Writivism short story competition in 2016 has also been selected to adapt the short story to the screen.” Adds Tsitsi.

So are we empowering women and leaving out men? Tsitsi responds:

The hub is a safe space for women to develop and practice their filmmaking capacity and tell their own stories. Men who are supportive of this are welcome, and we do have male members of the hub from Malawi and Tanzania. At the same time, we recognise that after they have passed through the hub programmes, African women filmmakers will have to work in an environment where they will be working with and even competing with men. In order to accommodate this reality, a quota of 15 per cent men was set for hub activities.

We spoke to Vincho Nchogu, a Kenyan filmmaker based in New York and working as a producer on a Zambian Film, Afronauts (currently in pre-production) supported by Sundance, Sloan Foundation and Film Independent. Asked about filmmaking for African women vis-à-vis American women filmmakers, he said:

Speaking in general, there are more opportunities in film in America than any other nation in the world, but that doesn’t mean it’s easier for women, in fact it’s harder for women in film in America than some African countries like Kenya. That said, with the recent success of Wonderwoman, with female lead and directed by a female director, Hollywood is shocked at the success of the film, meaning the future of women in film is finally here.

Vincho believes that hubs like the African women filmmakers hub are important:

We need more. In particular, I would love to see a combination of arts and science hub. A good example is Pioneer Works in Red Hook, NY. They have found a way to marry arts and science as these two fields are co-related. Such hubs not only bring people together but, as you know, when great minds commune, big things happen, so yes to more hubs.

Vincho is a beneficiary of a hub, the Film Independent Producers’ Lab, which he describes as follows:

The lab took place for a whole month in Los Angeles. There were eight projects altogether, and nine producing fellows. During the one month, we reworked our pitches, met with industry professionals to work on our development and distribution strategies, and on the last day we pitched to companies that were looking for projects to work on. We also visited post-production studios in LA to see what options we had. I think African hubs should go beyond the development/writing stage, they should go beyond granting. They should be aimed at not just producing work but also distributing work. That is why I will emphasise sci-tech-art collaborations. Tech people are good at creating platforms that address particular problems. MPESA for example began as a way to bring banking to rural minorities in Kenya, but now it is the model for mobile banking worldwide.

Vincho concludes by saying “Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter. So until the African woman learns how to write and tell her stories, male stories will always dominate.”

And that’s why Tsitsi ends by challenging us young African filmmakers: “You must have the strength of personality to learn the skills of the craft, and the courage to tell your stories well from your own African perspective, while embracing all of humanity.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Damaris Irungu Ochieng’ is an International Emmy award-winning writer for Shujaaz comic, Jonglo Love Radio and TV Drama (in the digital programme, children and young people categories). She spearheaded the script development team in the production of 71, sixty-minute TV movies of different genres and languages (Swahili and English) for MNET’s project Africa Magic original films. She wrote some of the films such as Kiberan Shakespeare, Run honeymooners, Die husband Die, Sopi among others. She has written several movies for the Nigerian market including Matchmaker and Tough Ladies among others. She also created and scripted Nyumba 10. She is the winner of the Kenyan edition of the short film competition by the African women filmmakers’ hub script writing competition.
For as long as many of us can remember, the narratives of modern black womxn from across the continent have been overlooked and underrepresented. Many of the images shown of young womxn in Africa are fetishised and idealised representations by the west and are not a true expression of what it means to be young, black and African. When reflecting on photographs in the media of African womxn, they are often not of the womxn whom I have grown up being surrounded by. Today, as a young Somali-Kenyan living in South Africa I seek to reclaim my narrative through photographing young womxn around me. Not only do they inspire, but they are changing the way in which the world sees them also the way they see themselves.

"Am I represented in mainstream media? Definitely no, but what’s changed now is that I have the power to seek my own representation in media spaces especially online, where I can curate these platforms to reflect who I am as an individual.” explains Jessica Loko Mule a young 22-year old from Kenya studying Business Science at the University of Cape Town.

When capturing these photos the focus was to explore the different, eclectic lives of young 20-something African womxn in Cape Town. The womxn in these photographs are students, activists, intellectuals, bloggers, and artists of various disciplines. They are multidimensional in their experience and existence. The narratives of such womxn, especially in a vastly diverse but heavily segregated city such as Cape Town, are often drowned out. Their daily encounters navigating through problematic spaces within the city as migrants, queer bodies, and black womxn are either erased or are simply never heard. In taking these photographs I wanted to ensure that these are depictions of African womxn in their own quiet, private spaces without the outside world gazing in. I wanted to present a true portrayal of their being.

Lolo Ndlovu, an Honours student at the University of Cape Town, describes a positive shift in black womxn’s representation in Africa. “A great example would be the work of Zanele Muholi whose illustrations of black lesbian womxn from South African townships is phenomenal. It’s something we haven’t seen. It’s visceral, raw, honest. Uncomfortable, but necessary. There’s definitely been a change, and people can express themselves and truly harness their own individualistic being.” However, like Jessica, Lolo and many other young African womxn still feel that mainstream media are rigid in their impressions of African womxn today, and only slightly incorporate the multidimensional nature of their existence.
There are not nearly enough intersectional photographers, publications and media platforms that are engaging in not only providing agency for African womxn’s narratives, but who are also reimagining stories from the continent away from western thought and palette, with the sole purpose of interacting with a purely African audience. The stories that I illustrate are those that encapsulate everyday encounters of womxn on the continent and bring to life the moments as they occur and are experienced. I want to showcase to the world the faces of modern Africa, the womxn not draped in stereotypes or displayed as photographic accessories, womxn who have absolute agency over their representation and are claiming their position in the world, one photograph at a time.

As we find Ourselves in the divine Black metamorphosis on the Continent, I have experienced the shift in how African Womxn have come to represent Ourselves. Coming from that place of introspection allows Us to reframe how we see Ourselves and share with the world who We are becoming. We are remembering, every time we click the shutter, we utter resistance to cultural domination and psycho-visual enslavement. It is an impulse of a magical worldview that stems from Our world sense. We’ve come a long way from fetish postcards and our bodies in jars, though some people are still perpetuating the same habits that position the African Womxn’s body as a commodity and a fetish. (Words by Chaze Matakala, decolonial writer and photographer from Zambia living in Cape Town.)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aisha Waniru Mugo is a Somali-Kenyan student at the University of Cape Town where she is currently undertaking an undergraduate degree in Environmental and Geographical Sciences and Geology. She is a member of the UCT based Gender Action Research Squad which engages in action research around issues affecting young people in South Africa, including sexual and reproductive health rights, gender and sexuality, bodily autonomy and intersectionality.
Mhandara

With twisted, dry lips and a lazy, self-righteous gracelessness, Aunts, fat and fraying, wait for me to greet them first – A careful cupping of the hands, a modest (dishonest) tilt Of the head to the floor and then an applause. With practice and ease, they have Pleased everyone but themselves. They are to be commended, Applauded.

“Yuhwi! Are those breasts? When did they grow? Tell us.” (I am the succeeding novice, see).

I look like all their regrets – audacious. I arch my back, drawing all attention to the succulent Round swelling of my breasts, breasts rich with firm virginity – Baulky, a young girl at her beginning, Full of life, full of choice, full of a wicked liberty they Were never allowed to indulge in.

They will throw tongues at me for this vulgar performance And I will smile as I listen to the desperate jealousy in their voices. They think I am too young to have an opinion, But they are too old to be so foolish. These depths are infathomable, I am the result of eventful years.

You want to prepare me to be somebody’s wife. Have you prepared anybody to be my husband? You have not. You have prepared a stable for mysterious cattle. You will die before you see its use and I am not sorry.
Subjects As Critical As Breathing

We do not discuss politics
At the dining table (…) in case
We accidentally stab it with our
Forks, lift it to our open mouths,
Swallow.
Furtively, we push it to the edge of our plates
Hoping that it might fall off,
Be cleaned away after the meal.
We scrub our plates with barbed wire
Before we go to bed,
Cutting our fingers
On the job.

We bleed.

When citizenship becomes an act of
Self-sacrifice or the tragedy of
The choice-less, know that something has gone
Terribly wrong.
Silence is suicidal. Human rights are not political.
There is no miracle “Somebody”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanatsei Gambura is a poet and spoken word artist,
who revels in being on and off stage. Her work explores
the implications of African culture, identity and
womanhood. She thrives for her art to be a brewing
revolution, a pair of wings, and a place of healing.
These words are an expression of what I feel,
And though I pen them down in a poem,
The passion I feel is bigger than I can express here,
but I will try.

Why Africa why? Why Africa?
Why I say nhai Africa? Why Africa dearest?
Shungu dzangu Africa, My pain my anguish,
My very burden the pain deep in my gut,
An overwhelming state of deep expectation
For your very potential consumes me.

I’m pregnant with high hopes and aspirations for what you could do for your own,
You said give back my inheritance, indeed you fought for it.
You proved your strength, your power and claimed your ability,
Now your time is up Africa, it’s up to you to show us what you got.
Your inheritance you embraced,
But tell me why your children are crying,
Suffering as if they are orphans, orphans without a father or mother,
Like guttersnipes and tatterdemalion hunger and wars?
Joblessness identifies them.
Show me what you call your birthright,
And I’ll challenge you to demonstrate your worth.
You are blessed with wealth, why do you burn?

I challenge you to occupy your inheritance,
But look after your own, to build a legacy to leave beyond the present,
I challenge you to fear God, He who blesses you with wealth,
STOP plunder and STOP the squander,
STOP borrowing from your children’s future,
Build for them,
Bring back the lost glory, bring back your respect,
Rule with fear and love, return from all evil.
Young people take your place, your place to lead with honour today,
Trust in the LORD and do good, then you shall prosper,
YES! and arise and shine your time is now!

Amka Africa, for your time is now,
Amka Africa, for your time is now,
Arise and shine for your time is now,
There is no better time
Better time than now
Simuka Africa,
Your time is now
Phakama Africa,
for your time is now,
Amka Simuka Phakama Africa.
The international development community has long focused on building the capacity of and ‘empowering’ the youth as a strategy to cultivate a generation of able agents of change. These interventions were largely led by adults and designed by external entities with some youth consultation. However, US foreign policy assistance and the discourse around how best to ‘empower’ youths on the African continent is shifting away from traditional capacity-building paradigms.

Practitioners are seeking new approaches to recognise and leverage existing capacities and to embrace locally driven solutions. The launch of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) ushered in a new era of youth engagement on the continent, encouraging youth across 49 countries in sub-Saharan Africa to work together as one network, and tap into their servant leadership potential to challenge and rewrite existing narratives on youth agency. The programme utilises the concept of ubuntu to facilitate network-building and recognises and supports young leaders’ entrepreneurial and civic capacities.

So far, the Mandela Washington Fellowship, the flagship programme of YALI, began in 2014 and has brought nearly 3 000 young African leaders from 49 countries across sub-Saharan Africa to the US for academic coursework and leadership training. The Fellowship also offers young African change makers:

- Unique opportunities to network with US institutions and companies;
- Targeted internship and mentorship opportunities in the US and Africa to enrich their skills, help expand their network, and build partnerships;
- Platforms to share their work through regional conferences, and facilitated speaking engagements;
- Access to training, and professional development opportunities to support their ideas, businesses, and organisations; and
- Opportunities to catalyse their inherent leadership potential and talent to serve on fellow-led Regional Advisory Boards.

Shifting paradigms: Ubuntu, servant leadership, and the power of the network

Traditional capacity-building approaches were largely interventions for teaching and training directed at individuals already employed within organisations. ‘It was also often referred to as capacity building implying that capacities did not yet exist, and needed to be built up from scratch’ (Walters, 2006, p. 1). However, this approach has shifted:

The current understanding of the concept of capacity development recognizes that there is no situation in which capacity does not exist. The question is whether the existing capacities are being recognized and whether the existing capacities are capacities that enable individuals and organisations to perform well in what they want to achieve (ibid).

The Mandela Washington Fellowship provides a model for operationalising this new approach. The programme fosters youth leadership by tapping existing potential, providing customised opportunities, and cultivating networks to mobilise a generation of national and global ambassadors who are working together to shift policies, create movements, and address local and global challenges. The Fellowship does this by utilising ubuntu as the bedrock for its leadership model. Murithi (2006) explains the concept, citing activist Desmond Tutu:

The idea behind this world-view of ubuntu is that ‘a person is a person through other people’. We are human because we...
Ubuntu may be the underlying value that drives the Fellowship, but servant leadership is the model or behaviour by which fellows enact change. Servant leadership was first referenced by Robert K Greenleaf in the 1970s, has been of interest to leadership scholars for more than 40 years, and ‘emphasises that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathise with them, and nurture them. Servant leaders put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities’ (Northhouse, 2016, p. 225).

Servant leaders value community and, as Spears (2002) explains, servant leadership for practitioners centres on key characteristics such as listening, empathy, awareness, foresight, building community, and the commitment to the growth of people. The most notable figure to embrace servant leadership was Nelson Mandela, and his vision for youth across Africa is a cornerstone of YALI and the Fellowship.

At the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), we harness the spirit of ubuntu by encouraging peer collaboration and networking. Ubuntu may be the underlying value that drives the Fellowship, but servant leadership is the model or behaviour by which fellows enact change. Servant leadership is the model or behaviour by which fellows enact change. The most recent articulation of the aid effectiveness principles at Busan has added an important nuance: Effective and sustainable development is inclusive development... Inclusive country ownership means that development priorities are established in ways that are broadly responsive to citizen needs and aspirations. Inclusive country systems also recognize that all parts of society – certainly governments, but also civil society, the private sector, universities and individual citizens – have important resources, ideas and energy that are essential to sustaining development.

The spirit of ubuntu is not just present in how fellows collaborate to launch an initiative, but is also visible in times of distress when the network is called upon to help those in need. For example, Oumou Kane, a 2015 fellow from Mauritania is the founder and president of the Association Multiculturelle pour un Avenir Meilleur (AMAM), an NGO established in 2011. AMAM focuses on gender equality and women’s empowerment and promotes leadership and capacity development for community mobilisation and social change. In April 2017, Oumou and her comrades were detained for organising a peaceful protest held by civil society organisations, including youth associations, in Nouakchott, Mauritania’s capital (Amnesty International, 2017). Fellows from across the continent banded together to organise a petition, collecting signatures or donors. Many argue that locally driven solutions are more sustainable, and likely have greater buy-in from local stakeholders. This line of thinking underpins USAID’s Local Systems Framework, first circulated in 2014, which charts the discourse around aid effectiveness. From the Paris Declaration in 2005 to Busan in 2011, it also examines how best to sustain development gains. The Local Systems report (USAID, 2014, p. v) states that:

The central insight is that external aid investments are more likely to catalyze sustained development processes when they reinforce a country’s internally determined development priorities (country ownership) and arrangements (country systems). The most recent articulation of the aid effectiveness principles at Busan has added an important nuance: Effective and sustainable development is inclusive development... Inclusive country ownership means that development priorities are established in ways that are broadly responsive to citizen needs and aspirations. Inclusive country systems also recognize that all parts of society – certainly governments, but also civil society, the private sector, universities and individual citizens – have important resources, ideas and energy that are essential to sustaining development.

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Oumou’s story reinforces the importance of the Local Systems Framework, and how individual citizens within a country or a region have the necessary energy and ideas to sustain development or a campaign to engender good governance, human rights and accountability. The power of the network is key. We hear from fellows on a daily basis about how they are collaborating, sharing and working together to enable change.

A platform for redefining youth entrepreneurialism

While youth unemployment remains high across the continent, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, governments across these countries, ‘are promoting entrepreneurship as a means of addressing employment challenges that young people face’ (Chigunta, 2017, p. 433). As scholars have noted, positive attitudes toward entrepreneurship are a potential key source of existing interest and capacity that can be tapped.

Attitudes towards entrepreneurship amongst young people are more positive in Africa than the majority of the rest of the world – of the ten countries with the highest numbers of start-ups, five are in Africa... What does this say about Africa?

It shows that Africa’s innovators are hungry for the kind of success that makes a meaningful difference to their lives and the wider community (Poulson, 2015).

YALI similarly recognises and focuses on supporting the existing entrepreneurial capacity of fellows through professional practicums, akin to expert internships, mentorships, speaking engagements, and other opportunities to network and build leadership skills. The Fellowship has three separate tracks which young African leaders can embark on – Public Management, Business and Entrepreneurship, and Civic Leadership – which foster an entrepreneurial spirit by motivating each leader to chart a course and work across the network to foster change in their communities.

The ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ has been defined to represent people who ‘challenge the norm, have original opinions that move a discussion forward, and act with tenacity and determination’ (Smith, 2013). At IREX, we have taken that definition and expanded it to include a fervour for leveraging creativity and innovation to tackle both personal and professional challenges. YALI fosters this spirit by connecting fellows to mentors, internships, practicums, speaking engagements and opportunities to build leadership skills by serving on fellow-led Regional Advisory Boards, for example, as an outlet to harness creativity and problem-solving skills.

In an interview with IREX, 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow Adepeju Opeyemi Jaiyeoba shared that she believed the Fellowship strengthened her confidence, skills and network and helped her reach more women in her community in Nigeria. A lawyer by trade, Adepeju founded Mother’s Delivery Kit after a friend died during childbirth. She realised that she could raise greater awareness and prevent future deaths by empowering women with the knowledge and tools to protect their health.

During the Fellowship, Adepeju attended a six-week programme at the University of Texas, a designated business and entrepreneurship institute. She learned how to expand her customer base and double production to increase the efficacy of her operations in Nigeria and serve more communities. Adepeju credits her experience as a fellow as helping her grow her company and access resources and networks that helped her improve her training scheme, which educates midwives and assistants about safe delivery methods.

Adepjeu shared the following with IREX:

At the Institute and during my time as a Fellow, I gained background knowledge in business and learned to focus on sustainability as an important tool for the

The Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) values servant leadership for practitioners centres on key characteristics such as listening, empathy, awareness, foresight, building community, and the commitment to the growth of people.

JEAN LUC KITUNKA, OSISA
“My internship at the UN Foundation was a game changer for me, creating critical learning and practical experience in global health which I previously lacked. Monitoring expansion and growth, strategically building new partners, measuring impact, and designing innovation were some of the key lessons I took away from the internship. I’ve found that opportunities like this internship are essential for the growth of young professionals across the continent. It is proof how far progress can go when global lessons are adopted to fit local circumstances.”

Adepeju has not abandoned her entrepreneurial drive. She has helped rural women earn a commission on the delivery kit sales, enabling them to build greater financial sustainability for their families. Adepeju recently said:

“I am also deeply grateful for the key support mechanisms to leverage existing capacity. Currently, Peter Nyamai, a 2016 fellow from Kenya, is interning at Afircqua, a social venture that distributes purified safe drinking water. At his practicum, Peter is learning about distribution channels and how to build relationships with vendors, which he hopes will help grow his own company, Expressions Global Group Limited. Peter’s company focuses on harvesting rainwater, but is currently struggling with distribution to rural communities. Peter is confident that the relationship he has cultivated with his practicum host will lead to a future partnership as they work to improve access to clean and affordable water for rural Kenyans.

In May 2017, 100 fellows from 14 countries in East Africa convened to discuss how to promote regional development through harnessing youth innovation and leadership. Peter presented his work with Expressions Global Group Limited to a panel of potential corporate partners, as part of the conference’s pitch competition plenary. After his presentation, he was awarded a six-month free membership to Nairobi Garage, a co-working space where he can work with his team to help build his business. The regional conferences are one example of a platform the Fellowship provides to help young Africans connect with potential partners, and collaborate to generate ideas with other leaders. These opportunities are critical for fellows who are already leading the change in their communities. There are countless stories of how fellows who are not entrepreneurs, but members of parliament, teachers and doctors, are collaborating or launching projects to troubleshoot issues in their community or sector. Supporting the entrepreneurial drive and spirit is also critical to the leadership journey of youth who want to feel supported and confident as they tackle a challenge.

Africa’s young ambassadors for good governance

Institutions also matter, particularly when looking to sustain change. While there are countless stories of fellows collaborating to launch organisations and businesses, and even creating social media campaigns to raise awareness, there are also fellows working to engender democratic governance in their countries. Look no further than the 2016 Gambian election.

Committed to ensuring a successful transition of power and responsibilities after the Gambian election, Alieu Jallow, a 2015 fellow, shared with IREX that he led a delegation of eight young Gambians to meet with newly elected President Adama Barrow. The youth delegation members met through YALI. During their meeting, Alieu and his colleagues reminded Barrow not to lose sight of the issues affecting youths in the country and asked him to remain committed to democratic values.

Alieu, a young entrepreneur in Banjul, credits his time at Northwestern University and his Fellowship as exposing him to the centrality of citizen engagement in sustaining and strengthening American democracy. With almost 60 percent of Gambians being under 25 years of age, ‘a new generation of young leaders is on the verge of becoming a potent force in determining the direction of their country’ (Tangirala, 2017). Many attributed the peaceful transition of power to the role neighbouring countries played in working together against the Gambian dictator Yahya Jammeh, while, ‘At IREX, we also saw a movement of youth, who met as part of an international exchange programme, coming together to fight for the future’ (Ibid).”
the political impasse, we [the youths] saw the need to add our voice to the call for a peaceful transfer of power,” Jallow says. “We need to remind incoming leaders not to lose track of the important issues to build a new Gambia” (Tangirala, 2017).

President Barrow agreed to sign a commitment drafted by Alieu, which stated that he would labour to ‘enhance public institutions to inspire positive dialogue between youth and government, respect the voice of the people, and adhere to the rule of law’ (Tangirala, 2017). Alieu and the other young leaders plan to meet with the President again to discuss the administration’s progress on the commitments he made. According to Alieu, ‘Access to a network of young leaders within Gambia and across sub-Saharan Africa only adds momentum to the movement of youth in Africa’ (Tangirala, 2017).

Fellows and young Africans are taking ownership and playing a greater role in raising critical awareness around issues of governance, accountability, transparency and human rights. For example, fellows launched YALICreatives in 2015 as a collective of Mandela Washington Fellows working together to promote freedom of expression using the media and creative arts. The organisation has 500 members led by 40 Mandela Washington Fellows in 13 African countries. This year, YALICreatives is holding a #JumpstartZW master class across six cities in Zimbabwe (Masvingo, Mutare, Harare, Gweru, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls) for civic leaders, data journalists, social media activists, human rights activists and investigative journalists. These classes aim to help these key influencers learn how to use their position to cultivate greater transparency and accountability among public institutions.

Recently, a 2015 fellow from Mali, Moussa Kondo, reflected on his practicum (internship) with the Accountability Lab in Liberia. IREX placed Moussa at the Lab, which focuses on ‘training young journalists and cultivating a culture of accountability within the media space’ (Renfield-Miller, 2017). ‘Moussa thrived at the Lab and decided to expand its work to his home country, opening an office in Bamako’ (ibid). The Accountability Lab’s approach places emphasis on finding solutions to corruption, rather than focussing on the problems. Moussa said that this approach is more effective than those commonly followed in Mali. He also indicated that he is not looking to the current leadership within Mali for guidance on moving the country forward. He is working to cultivate the next generation of youth leaders who can champion transparency and accountability.

‘My work is a movement, not just a set of projects,’ Moussa says. ‘We want to help this younger generation of Malians come together and collectively push for the change they want to see. It is a collaborative process, through which we all learn, share, adapt, and continue to push for new ways of doing things. That is very powerful’ (Renfield-Miller, 2017).

Conclusion

The Fellowship only represents one component of YALI. The YALI Network and Regional Leadership Centers (RLCs) are also in operation. Four YALI RLCs – in Kenya, South Africa, Senegal and Ghana – train young leaders in leadership, entrepreneurship and professional development (YALI, n.d.). Both the RLCs and the YALI Network offer platforms for young African leaders to take courses and network.

YALI is one of many initiatives on the continent that bring youths together to network and form new networks. The YALI movement is strong, reaching over 69 countries, and countless alumni associations like YALICreatives are cropping up every year. The
Fellowship is an interesting paradigm for practitioners and donors alike to examine. Perhaps what has made it an effective initiative is how it embraces ubuntu as its driving philosophy and servant leadership as the means by which fellows act. Building capacity alone is not sufficient. Leadership and networks need to be cultivated and supported alongside.

At IREX, we believe that tapping the potential of the youth will help unleash greater returns which will be more sustainable in the long run. Moussa’s work and his commitment to reaching his leadership potential and fostering this in others illustrate why networks are powerful and fundamentally catalytic. IREX will continue to observe how the network is evolving as we seek to understand whether or not collective power for change is exponentially more effective than traditional development programming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neetha Tangirala is a skilled project manager with over a decade of experience supporting the work of youth, civil society, and human rights defenders. Neetha joined IREX in April 2013 and currently provides programmatic support to the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders. Previously Neetha supported IREX’s work to increase public access to information by strengthening public libraries systems, and provided editorial support to IREX’s Media Sustainability Index. She previously managed programmes at Amnesty International in London, and at the National Endowment for Democracy. Neetha is committed to providing solid evidence-based technical support, employing adaptive learning, and generating digital content to amplify impact.

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Where it all starts for
the young woman

Having been born and bred in the dusty streets of Soweto, where life is the complete opposite to those who wake up in the beautiful, plush suburbs of Johannesburg North, I have always been mindful that life might not turn out the way I would have hoped for. My family, and in particular my mother and grandmother, always tried by every means possible to shield me from the challenges that life might throw at a black child who does not grow up in the warm arms of privilege.

The transition into a non-racialised, democratic South Africa during the 1990s seemed promising, and in my mother’s eyes the time had come for us to maximise the opportunities that the new democratic South Africa promised. The first step was leaving the township and moving to Yeoville, a vibrant and ethnically diverse suburb, which would allow me to access the Model C schools that were reserved for my white counterparts during the apartheid era. I would have opportunities at my fingertips, which would create a pathway to the better life that my mother never had.

From birth, it has always been clear that to live a life which would enable me to maximise my potential meant being socialised within different circles and being situated in a different environment – well that is what I was led to believe and think. Today, more than sixteen years later, whenever I visit my grandmother in Soweto it is interesting to see how life worked out for my peers. My grandmother always tells me about the long queue of young women collecting their social grants, and how she is happy to see her granddaughter not being part of that “social ill”. According to her (and many other people), these young women become pregnant as a way to access social grants from the government. The notion is that the children of these young women have become a source of income, and that these mothers do not prioritise finding other sources of income (such as employment) because they become dependent on the social grants.

Teenage pregnancy remains an issue which requires our attention, but I wish to discredit the myth that young women are falling pregnant as a way to get social grants from the government. For many years (and even now), teenage pregnancy has been an issue which society continuously shies away from. It requires us to address it in a more holistic perspective, which unpacks the underlying societal and individual challenges confronting these young women. When I hear about these young mothers and how society has stereotyped them, it makes me wonder whether, if life had afforded them different opportunities, they would have been where they are in their lives.

A report by Partners in Sexual Health (PSH 2013: 7), indicates that unplanned teenage pregnancy is propelled by a number of issues, including “unequal gender relations; gendered expectations of boys and girls; taboos around teenage sexuality making discussions around the topic difficult and fuelling stigma towards pregnant teenagers; poor access to contraceptives; judgmental attitudes of health care workers, teachers and community members; low rates of consistent and correct contraceptive usage, and very little dual protection to protect against both unplanned pregnancies and STIs and HIV.” These issues significantly contribute to teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood,
It is sheer prejudice to argue that young women are falling pregnant in order to access social grants. Having discussed the realities that they face, it is clear that the social inequality in which they are confined breeds a number of pressures related to unexpected pregnancies.

Reconceptualising inequality

Inequality remains a deterrent to Africa’s growth according to a report presented at the 2017 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Durban, South Africa (cited in Zimela 2017). African countries feature predominantly on the list of the 20 most unequal economies in the world, with South Africa ranking fourth. The World Bank has graded South Africa as one of the most unequal countries in the world, with “the poorest 20% of the South African population consuming less than 3% of total expenditure, while the wealthiest 20% consume 65%” (World Bank, 2017). Despite South Africa’s efforts towards improving the well-being of its citizens since the dawn of democracy, progress has been slow (ibid).

According to the Africa Human Development Report: Advancing Gender Equality (2016: 4), gender inequality costs sub-Saharan Africa an average of $95 billion a year. The report highlights the reality that “Women are more likely to be found in vulnerable employment with weak regulation and limited social protection due to differences in education and the mismatch between women’s skills and those demanded by the labour market. This in turn pushes women into the informal economy,” (ibid). It is evident that at the core of gender inequality are unequal power relations between women and men, and that these have been normalised through patriarchy. Women in South Africa continue to face the harsh realities of poverty and HIV/AIDS, in difficult socioeconomic conditions where patriarchal attitudes perpetuate the abuse of women and high rates of domestic violence (Losí 2016).

It is not surprising that young women find themselves bearing the brunt of this unequal society, and it is for this reason that we need to probe the narrative that young women have resorted to social grants as a source of livelihood. From birth, the life of a black woman has meant that she would have to overcome a number of hurdles before she can become who she aspires to be. The fight against gender inequality should be one that adopts an all-inclusive approach which takes into account the young female population that is a significant part of South African demographics.

Unexpected pregnancies

An article entitled “‘Babies for bling’: how teenage pregnancy became emblematic of misspent youth in South Africa” (Nicolson 2016) explores the model of “pregnancy for profit”. In this piece, Nicolson presents both sides of the “pregnancy-for-profit” notion, mentioning that young women are believed to have children in order to access child support grants which aid them in leisure pursuits and the acquisition of luxury items. The article also shows that there is no evidence that teenage girls use pregnancy as a source of income. Instead, one of the young mothers interviewed for the study described the difficulties of being a teenage mother, and how her pregnancy has resulted in her studies coming to a halt as she has to focus on being a mother. In most cases, the young woman is obliged to take sole responsibility for the child because she is the mother. Society expects her to exercise her maternal role, while the father escapes all responsibility.

Once again inequality shows its face through the practices of patriarchy. In trying to understand this preposterous attitude towards young women, it is very important that we get to the core of the matter by addressing the possible causes which could have led to them becoming mothers at an early age. The PSH report (2013:14) cites Jewkes et al (2009: 676), noting that “teenage pregnancy is not just an issue of reproductive health and young women’s bodies, but rather one in its cause and consequence that is rooted in women’s gendered social environment.” Panday et al (2009) present a summary of factors that place teenage girls in South Africa at risk of early pregnancy. These factors highlight the impacts and pressures of an unequal society:

• the dropping out of young girls from school at an early stage is often because of economic obstacles and poor school performance;
• young girls often find themselves growing up in areas of deep-rooted poverty;
• there are no spaces that present the opportunity to discuss sexuality where there are high levels of stigma about adolescent sexuality, so there is a gap in knowledge and access to family planning services and contraceptives;
• men are autonomous in making decisions about sex in situations where young women are involved in relationships where there is an uneven balance of power, which often results in unprotected or coerced sex (or both);
• young women who are poor often find themselves in transactional relations which require them to make trade-offs between health and economic security, which can result in abusive relationships, intergenerational relationships, and multiple partners, reducing a young women’s power to negotiate when and how to have sex.

The contraction of HIV remains pertinent given the nature of some of these sexual relations. PSH (2013: 63) cites Pettifor et al (2009: 82), and mentions that early sexual debut heightens HIV risk, so “sexual
behaviours at the time of early coital debut (e.g. non-use of condoms) may set a precedent for future behaviours that elevate HIV risk.” Not only are these young women exposed to the risk of contracting HIV, but also sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Teenage pregnancy is affected by various social dynamics, including race, socioeconomic status, geography and education (PSH, 2013, p.21). Studies such as that conducted by the South African Demographic and Health Surveys showed that teenage pregnancy was more prevalent in rural areas, amongst women with lower educational accomplishment, and amongst African and Coloured women (ibid). This finding reflects the interconnectedness of race factors, which also have ties to economic class.

**Structural factors that disempower young women**

The multiple drivers of unplanned pregnancies require us to address the structural factors that disempower young women, preventing them from being in control of with whom and when to have sex. When considering teenage pregnancy, looking at intergenerational sex is imperative because it places teenage girls at risk of not being able to exercise their agency – these relationships are based on power.

Young women have often found themselves in sexual relationships which are transactional. There usually exists a huge age difference within these relationships, with the male partners being called “blessers” or “sugar-daddies” as they provide financial support to the young women. Therefore when these young women engage in sexual activities with their older partners, their partners hold considerable bargaining power based on the financial aid they provide. In many instances, young women have been raped by their partners, and then had to deal with unplanned pregnancies. Poverty is a contributor to and a consequence of early pregnancy. Many young women try to find the means to survive, and in some cases transactional relationships are the only way to survive.

The use of contraceptives and access to healthcare facilities comes into question. Some studies of healthcare workers reflect low levels of knowledge about contraceptives among teenagers (PSH 2013: 27). Healthcare workers have said that information about the consequences of sex and the importance of prevention has been insufficient. Parents have often not taken the initiative to openly discuss sex with their daughters, and the need for family planning. In some instances it is seen as taboo to promote the use of condoms amongst young people, as it has been viewed as promoting sexual activities (Bolowana 2014). “While adolescents have knowledge about contraceptive methods, gaps exist in the accuracy of their knowledge or skill regarding the correct use of contraception” (Panday et al. 2009: 56). Teachers are also very uncomfortable about discussing sex, and bring their own moral views into the discussion (PSH 2013, p.28).

**Debunking the myth**

It is sheer prejudice to argue that young women are falling pregnant in order to access social grants. Having discussed the realities that they face, it is clear that the social inequality in which they are confined breeds a number of pressures related to unexpected pregnancies. Stats SA has publicly dispelled the notion that young women are falling pregnant in the hopes of obtaining social grants. Statistician-General Pali Lehohla said:

> There is a notion that the grants influence young kids, young girls to produce children... the evidence before us over a period from 1998 to 2016 doesn’t show that. It doesn’t show any increase in the proportion of teenagers who are giving birth, therefore dismissing and dispelling with that myth which is popular [among] parents especially in rural areas... In fact, among the 19-year-olds, it has declined from 35 percent to 28 percent. Teenage pregnancy is not increasing and therefore nothing can be attributed to the grants. (Africa News Agency, 2017)

The Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has explained that the majority of young girls only register for social grants two years after the child is born. According to the minister (based on the findings provided by the latest Stats SA survey, cited by Maromo 2017):

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The Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has explained that the majority of young girls only register for social grants two years after the child is born. According to the minister (based on the findings provided by the latest Stats SA survey, cited by Maromo 2017):
In the last three years, on average, the number of children ever born per woman was 2.6 compared to an average of 2.9 over a three year period ending in 1998. As of 2016, the average for the year was at 2.4 children per woman and this is 0.2 children lower than the three-year average based on the Community Survey of 2016. (Maromo 2017)

Unplanned teenage pregnancies should not be categorised as a social ill that should be dealt with by the expectant mother. The untold narrative is that prevailing inequality within society will unceasingly keep presenting these challenges, which the young women will have to confront. Not until there is an all-inclusive approach, which encompasses a gendered-lens within different layers of society, can we say that we are on the path to dealing with inequality.

Looking back at the decisions made by my mother when I was growing up, I think she feared that the environment I was born into would result in me facing the harsh realities of inequality, especially being born in a township. For her, that meant having an open relationship with me, which created the space for us to discuss sexuality and what it is in the eyes of a young girl. I think she knew that, for black women, there will be a series of obstacles to overcome, inequality being one of them. She tried to cushion the surface so that when life knocked me down it would not be so hard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lerato Mohlamenyane is a Masters student in political studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. She previously worked for the ACTION Support Centre as a Project Officer and has worked on special projects such as coordinating the Africa Insider Mediators Platform at the UNDP - Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery. She has a strong interest in the democratic systems in the Southern Africa region, with a particular interest in Lesotho’s coalition politics. Lerato has experience in project management and coordination and currently closely works with the OSISA Deputy Director/Head of Programmes.

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Recent years have seen an increasing popular appeal of youth uprisings in Africa. Some believe this to be the effect of the Arab spring, giving rise to the term the “African Spring”. While dissatisfaction with the socio-economic conditions has been a key motivator behind these uprisings, frustration with the current political leadership is at the centre.

Young people are often accused of not conforming. But should the youth really attempt to conform to the existing social order? Is non-conformity and disruption always negative? Perhaps, unconditional conformity is Africa’s main problem, and non-conformity is the solution. Maybe it is time to think beyond the existing structures and stop asking whether change is feasible, but rather how to make it happen. The main risk that the continent is facing may not be the failure to accommodate youth to the structure, but the failure to understand that there is a fundamental fallacy in attempting to do such thing in the first place.

In an era when democracy is the norm, the greedy current leadership’s desire to prolong their stay in power does not sit well with the people, and even less so with the youth. Considering that 65 percent of Africa’s total population is comprised of youth (of which 35 percent are between the ages of 15 and 35 years old – African Union Youth Division 2017), the common narrative raises the question whether this could be a blessing or curse for the continent? Is it a ticking time-bomb or an opportunity?

This article explores the recent uprisings of youth movements, and the prejudice that labels this as a non-conforming and disruptive strategy, to better understand how youth are carving space for themselves in both private and public spaces. The article specifically focuses on Southern African movements, and on the agency of young women.

**A blessing or curse?**

There is no doubt that Africa is standing at a crossroad. Whether this will result in its rise or its downfall depends primarily on the youth, and secondarily on the capacity of the existing political and socio-economic structures to accommodate the increasing youth population. With 60 percent of Africa’s unemployed being young people (Ighobor 2017: 14), a downfall seems likely. The commonly advocated solution is to increase the capacity of existing structures, but this black-and-white approach not only paints non-conformity of the youth to the existing structures as a problem; it also disregards young people’s ability to carve their own space and exist beyond the limits of the current structures. Moreover, this approach ignores the African context. The current inability to understand the youth, merged with a disregard for the context of the continent, is responsible for socio-economic stagnation and misdirected policies that youth cannot relate to, although it claims to be working in our favour.

While there has been significant progress on the continent (African Development Bank 2014), half of the continent experienced major protests in 2016 (Akwei 2016). The present context of Africa is one of widespread youth unemployment, rising corruption (www.transparency.org 2015), and greedy political leaders with very little accountability refusing to relinquish power, even in countries such as South Africa that were exemplary in the past (Patel 2013).

Looking specifically at the Southern African regional context:

- democracy in most countries has largely been instrumental rather than substantive, with limited citizen participation;
- there has been a failure to bring about meaningful change, despite regular elections;
- the region still faces elevated levels of food insecurity, unemployment, extreme poverty and inequality;
DISRUPTION AND NON-CONFORMITY: How youth are carving space for themselves in both private and public spheres

• there has been a failure to diversify the economy, which remains centred around resource extraction;
• the livelihoods of most people are informalised, presenting limited options for economic growth in rural areas;
• a failure to establish participatory institutions leaves power centralised around the presidency, and poor systems of transparency and accountability erode effective checks and balances, so communities are excluded from taking part in decisions that have serious impact on their lives;
• endemic corruption and ineffective frameworks to fight corruption;
• violent crackdowns by state machinery on populations who express their objections to ongoing exclusion and deprivation;
• some countries have weak constitutional and legal structures that are unable to defend and foster human rights and the rule of law, or to safeguard access to justice for all citizens, especially the marginalised communities.

How can we expect the youth to thrive in such a toxic environment with dysfunctional structures? In the current political landscape, a non-conforming and disruptive youth is not a curse that will make matters worse, but rather a blessing that will challenge the status quo. This can only be done by a generation that thinks outside and beyond the existing structures. Looking at it from this perspective, and in its proper context, provides us with more appreciation for what are often perceived as inherent flaws in the youth, but which are instead resistances and disruptive acts.

Non-conformity and disruption in politics

The increase in political consciousness among young people is the most significant advantage we hold, and our chance to sway things our way. Across the continent, recent years have seen young people taking the initiative, and demanding accountability and good governance from their leaders. This has sometimes brought about unexpected results.

An example is the Burkinabe Revolution of 2014, the initiative of a youth movement called Le Balai Citoyen (The Citizen Broom) to oppose a constitutional change that would have extended the 27 years of Blaise Compaore’s rule. This resulted in his resignation and exile to Ivory Coast. Just a few years before, the French government had been forced to withdraw a law that allowed the president to run for a third term.

Southern Africa has not been exempt from disruptive youth uprisings. The Fees Must Fall and Decolonising Knowledge movements in South Africa were unique in their sudden surge out of nowhere and their informal nature. They are often referred to as “pop-up” movements, reinforcing the labelling of youth movements as disruptive and non-conforming. This is the main difference between them and movements that were seen during the colonial and apartheid eras.

Non-partisanship and fluid

Partisanship characterised the older liberation movements to the extent that some of them became governing parties, and the interests of those countries and their people took a back-seat to the interests of the party (as seen in the case of the ANC in South Africa, and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe). The new youth movements clearly indicate their non-partisanship, and this is often reflected in voting patterns.

Research conducted by Afrobarometer in 36 African countries found that just 65 percent of young people eligible to vote did so in their country’s previous national election, in comparison to 80 percent of older people. This is despite the surge in political protests by the
youth. Political participation in the form of voting and engaging in civic activities remains low among those aged between 18-35 years old (Barton cited by Kuwonu 2017: 43). This trend is observed globally. Key among the reasons cited for young people’s detachment from the overall political process is their unwillingness to associate themselves with partisan politics, and their distrust of current elected representatives. Youth protest often falls under the banner of civic and non-partisan groups, with the purpose of keeping politicians accountable, as explained by Idrissa Barry of Le Balai Citoyen (Kuwonu 2017: 43): “We are not politicians, we are citizens and we don’t want to be beholden to political parties”. Yet, while those might be noble virtues, “by refusing to hold political office, young people appear to be denying themselves opportunities to participate in policy making and changing the laws” (Kuwonu 2017: 43).

Leaderless or leaderful?

A significant difference between the old and the new movements is in the nature and conception of leadership. Older movements were characterised by clearly defined hierarchy and a clear understanding of the roles of the leaders, which often turned into a personality cult around particular leaders at a later stage. The new movements promote a different understanding of leadership that focuses on the movement rather than its leaders. This is sometimes used to further the argument of those who see them as fundamentally non-conformist.

However, those new movements are not leaderless but “leaderful”; they exhibit the capacity to collectively lead (such as La Lucha in the DRC) and this has helped them to avoid the trap of the “Big Man Syndrome” that has characterised the older movements to the extent that it became an underlying part of them: Patrice Lumumba in the DRC, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Sam Nujoma in Namibia, and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe all outshone the cause they were fighting for, bringing more focus onto themselves than the movement or the cause. As a result, some of the leaders who fought for African independence ended up as dictators and refused to relinquish power. This is one of the problems that young people are refusing to conform to!

Women’s collective leadership

While the shift toward a focus on collective leadership has certain positive impacts, one crucial question to ask is how it has impacted on the roles and perception of women’s participation in political spaces. The most obvious impact is that it limits the visibility of the contributions of women as individuals in the struggle, depriving society of women leaders as role models. The leadership provided by Shaeera Kalla (Former Wits SRC president) (Madibogo 2016; Enca.com 2016), Nompandulo Mkhathwha (Wits SRC president) (Whittles, 2016), and Rebecca Kabugho (pro-democracy activist in the DRC and recipient of the 2017 Secretary of State’s International Women of Courage Award) (Buchanan 2017) appears to have been overshadowed in the new model.

In the older liberation movements, women’s roles were not always cast in the best of ways. Women’s contribution to liberation struggles was often suppressed by portraying them as an attachment to a male figure, such as Winnie Mandela to Nelson Mandela, Ruth first to Joe Slovo, Albertina Sisulu to Walter Sisulu. This sort of relationship dynamic has long been used to downplay the exceptional contributions that these particular women made in their own right. They tend to represented as merely supportive of their male counterparts, entrenching the idea that behind every powerful and successful man there is a woman. We ought to ask ourselves if our values should
Those who desire and seek to contribute to youth need to recognise how crucial and decisive the moment we live in is, providing opportunities to break a self-perpetuating cycle of the disenchanted joining the ranks and structures of the corrupt.

shift toward a focus on the movement rather than the individual in this case. Are women being subjected to another supportive role, except this time they are being supportive to the movement and not to a man? Or perhaps is this the style of women’s leadership?

Despite the recurring challenge that overshadows women’s agency and voices, some young women in the new movements have carved a space for themselves and challenged the dominant narrative of their “supportive role”. They have stood firm in reaffirming that the role of a woman isn’t behind a powerful man, but right beside him as equal in the struggle – or even going further to take the driver’s seat on the road to change.

In women’s collective leadership, a rise of an interesting and inspiring phenomenon should retain the attention of the masses. Following the tragic death of Karabo Mokoena, many women took to social media using the hashtag #MenAreTrash to relate their individual experience in a country where one in every four women face violence within their own homes and intimate relationships in 2016 (Masweneng 2017).

When a young woman named Aaleya Omar mentioned to her grandmother the #MenAreTrash debate, her grandmother laughed and said that the only thing that has changed is that women now speak up (Masweneng 2017). This captures the positive shift towards women’s voices not being silenced anymore, and women collectively empowering themselves using channels such as social media. It portrays the creative ways that youth are using to carve a space for themselves in both private and public spheres. Similarly, the recent #NotInMyName hashtag was an initiative in response to events that saw the emergence of #MenAreTrash (News24 2017). The streets of Pretoria saw hundreds of people marching against gender violence in solidarity with women and men, acknowledging that by being silent they have failed women (Enca.com 2017).

Another example of a collective women’s leadership in action was seen when the publication of a list of alleged rapists at Rhodes university led to an immediate mobilisation of young women by young women, who walked down the corridors of university residences, demanding to speak to the alleged perpetrators (News24 2016). This raised debate around the rape culture that has characterised various universities, the lack of answers from management, and the lack of policies to deal with this situation.

Conclusion

While the “informal” and “pop-up” nature of the new movements is often seen as a disadvantage, their advantage lies in the ease and rapidity of their capacity to mobilise people using social media. Concerns, however, remain about their capability to sustain the momentum and transform a cause on social networks to real long-term changes on the ground. This article discussed the increasing political consciousness among the youth in Africa, and explored the idea that disruption and non-conformity could be a proof of sanity rather than the opposite.

Seeing young women (and young people in general) expressing their voices in the public and private spheres shows that the youth have come to understand that the personal is political, but the question remains to what extent? There is no doubt that for them joining the existing political and socio-economic structures is not a viable option, and that many believe in non-partisanship. But should we really equate politics to partisanship? Should we leave government in the hands of the very political elites and parties we are fighting against?

While detachment from the political process is justifiable to the extent that non-participation is a refusal to perpetuate the continual existence of oppressive structures, we should acknowledge the dangers of this principled approach. Our unwillingness to partake in government and political offices is costing us in opportunities. By depriving ourselves of a voice where it really matters, we are restricting our access to the spheres where decisions are made on policies and laws. If we believe that there is a need for a change in leadership, a change that would best reflect the needs of young people, then who better than those in need of change to bring about the change? Who better than young people themselves to understand their own challenges and fix them? While it is acknowledged that youth are indeed taking the right steps, perhaps it is time to raise the bar and challenge ourselves to go further than “disruptive” protests.

Those who desire and seek to contribute to youth need to recognise how crucial and decisive the moment we live in is, providing opportunities to break a self-perpetuating cycle of the disenchanted joining the ranks and structures of the corrupt. The timing of the responses to youth concerns is crucial, as in the light of lack of interest from others, young people could become disenchanted with the prospect for change.

It is often said that young people are the future leaders of tomorrow, but what many (including the youth themselves) sometimes miss in that kind of narrative is that young people are also the leaders of today.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Mukoma is a 23 year-old Congolese (DRC) national who is currently residing in South Africa. He recently graduated from Monash University, with a bachelor degree in social science double majoring in international relations and criminology. He is currently an intern at OSISA, while pursuing an Honours Degree.

REFERENCES


I remember the feeling so vividly. It kept nagging at my core like a young child tugging at a mother’s dress, demanding instant attention. It made me feel uncomfortable, and I knew it was very real – at least it was for me. It was a deep-seated desire for a safe space for young women. A safe space that would bring together young women from different walks of life, aimed at facilitating the amplification of their authentic voice and being. This was my thinking when I got the opportunity to participate in a Young Feminist Leadership Course supported by Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) in collaboration with The Institute Of Peace, Leadership And Governance (IPLG) at Africa University.

The year was 2010, and it marked the beginning of a phenomenal journey, not just for me but also for many other growing feminist leaders in Southern Africa. That space also became a historical reality for young women, and the politics of voice and space in women’s movements in Southern Africa. This article is a reflection on that feminist journey, not just for me but also for others who have over the years been a part of the OSISA-supported efforts in building young women’s movements.

The Genesis

OSISA’s initiative for young feminists leadership was birthed from a study conducted and published in 2005, “The State of Women’s Movements in Southern Africa”. The study was very clear that the state of the women’s movements in Southern Africa was not an inspiring one. Gaidzanwa (2006), speaking of the women’s movements in Southern Africa during that era, argued that,

In recent years there have been a number of concerns raised about the state of the women’s movements in Southern Africa. The dearth of funding and leadership, and difficulties crafting a relevant gender-wise political agenda for a new generation of post-independence African citizens, are but a few of the crises.

It was argued that women’s movements had lost the steam that they had more than a decade ago (between 1995 and 2005). The backdrop of the study was the Beijing +10 Review, so it was a timely intervention to reflect on what had happened with women’s movements in the region, and then envision where the movements might want to go. OSISA (2006) noted that:

One of the main outcomes of the Beijing +10 consultative process was the observation of loss of vibrancy of the women’s movement. This continues to be a cause for concern both at the national and regional levels. To that end, OSISA identified this as a concern meriting immediate attention.

One of the three recommendations that came out of the study was that “Women’s organisations should hand-pick young women and give them space, and support them to rise within the organisation and within the women’s movement.” (OSISA 2005:73). It was almost like a commissioning of some sort, because following this statement a number of budding young feminist leaders were handpicked to catapult into motion the recommendations. In explaining the nature of the related programmes to this young feminist leadership vision, one of the young women who herself worked (and still works) with OSISA, Tsitsi Mukamba (2014) states that:

Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa launched the Young Women’s Voices Campaign in 2009. The campaign raises the political consciousness of young women and promotes their voices in the women’s rights agenda at all levels.
Young feminists leaders start movements and organizations.

Components of the campaign include the Southern African Young Feminist Leadership Course, the Southern African Young Women’s Platform, capacity building for young women’s networks and formations, and publishing a special issue of BUWA! journal.

My story

My journey with the OSISA-led Young Women’s Voices Campaign, began in 2010 at the Training Course on Feminist Leadership that targeted young women aged between eighteen and thirty. The training course had started in 2009 and was an initiative supported by OSISA, implemented in partnership with the Institute Of Peace, Leadership and Governance (IPLG) at Africa University. I was aged twenty-eight years at the time.

I had been working with the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ), but left to start the Zimbabwe Young Women’s Network for Peace Building (ZYWNP). I felt that there wasn’t the kind of safe space I was seeking at WCoZ at the time. What the core of my soul in that instance needed was a “space where women and girls, being the intended beneficiaries, feel comfortable and enjoy the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm” UNFPA (2015). Starting ZYWNP was not easy. I had never worked in a space like the one I wanted to create, but I was determined to create a space that would identify itself with young women and their needs. I wanted a space where young women could come together and just be, as we collectively transformed the development discourse to include young women’s voices. So when the call came to apply for the young feminist leadership course, I was thrilled. The course was an eye-opener for me. I had always known that I did not want to conform, but the training gave me a language for what I had always lived. Getting an insight into defining my narrative and worldview equipped me beyond imagination. Now, I could actually run the race knowing what it was I talking about. I got grounded in this newly found language, the F-word as we discovered it during that time, and what Feminism is all about. My life was never the same. It was like a rebirth.

Defining voice

Fivush (2002) notes that the way in which voice and silence are conceptualised emerges from place and power (Belenky et al 1986). She further explains that,

...Voice and silence will emerge within the individual as a function of their historical and cultural place and their individual history of specific interactions with specific others. ...Experiences that are voiced provide a sense of validation; experiences are accepted as real and the individual’s perspective on the experience is viewed as appropriate. Experiences that are silenced lead to a sense of existential despair; experiences are not heard or the individual’s perspective on the experience is not accepted as appropriate.

The spaces that OSISA created were spaces where young women moved from silence to agency. From their Young Women’s Voices Campaign emerged young women who understand their power within, and utilise that power to transform not only their own lives but also society as a whole. The young feminist leaders who met and engaged in feminist dialogue were able to understand their lives but the lives of others. They were able to relook at their lives, their experiences, and explore new ways of being. In some cases, these women understood the power of their voices so much that they began to be leaders of transformation in their families, communities and countries. In instances where these young women had experiences that were marked by violence, voicing those experiences gave them a new lease of life.
that they used to make a difference. In their experiences as young women, they became a source of inspiration and hope. They became an epitome of reflection, learning and feminist agency. On https://vimeo.com/60251789, a number of young women from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, and elsewhere were able to relate their narratives, explain how they found a language for their experiences, and how that helped to catapult them into action as they sought to make a difference.

On defining voice in close relationship with this reflection on how OSISA supported young women, it is critical to note that “The multiple and diverse voices of the female experience must be heard, celebrated, and united in order to strengthen the voice for feminism and dispel patriarchal and cultural norms” (McCue, 2014). The young feminist leaders who aggressively took up the challenge to transform the narrative that was defining the women’s movements in Southern Africa embraced this notion. The young women immediately ran with the baton and started moving and shaking their worlds, much to the dismay of the sisters who had been in the movement prior to these young women. McCue (2014) notes that, historically, women’s voices were either silenced or othered, but these young feminist leaders refused to have their voices silenced or othered. This created a new dynamic, not just for the young women themselves, but also for the movements in Southern Africa.

The contestations of ageism and building consensus

During the first two years of the ZYWNPB, the journey was tough for me. Maybe out of naivety, I had looked forward to the support of older sisters within the movement, but this did not happen. A quick catch-up with other young feminist sisters in the Southern African region at that time soon showed that it was not just the movement in Zimbabwe that suffered from the contestations of ageism. Although the young women did not necessarily seek confrontation with older generations, this soon became evident in the spaces where the various age groups would find themselves.

The discovery of our voice and power evoked something deep within the core of our souls. Something happens when someone finds her voice. It is very powerful. She discovers the butterfly she has always been, and refuses to settle for caterpillar realities. Unfortunately, sometimes the world will be so used to the caterpillar that they will not be able to face the butterfly. This illustrates the realities of the young women who became butterflies after their participation in the OSISA spaces. Sisters found their voice and power.

Challenging the status quo

With their newly found “super-powers”, young women’s participation in the women’s movements in Southern Africa was not a walk in the park. It was a contestation of space, power, voice, and agency. Young women had to explore ways to negotiate their power and space, but they also had to almost justify why they had to be in the women’s movements and why they needed to create safer spaces to connect and interact. The sisters who had formed the women’s movements struggled with the notions of legacy and transition. Faludi (2010) explains that the younger feminist finds these older feminists “stodgy, stuck in the past, lacking in humor, and hogging the power in organisations...” These were sisters who had long been part of the women’s movement and had no desire to leave and pave way for their younger sisters.

One of the painful realities was that the older women started accusing the younger women of failing to understand a thing about women’s emancipation. In an attempt to unpack the differences between the older and younger feminists, Faludi (2010) explains that young feminists are accused by older feminists of being self-centered and not caring about politics, but merely viewing liberation as the right to wear miniskirts, Wonderbras and stilettos. This way of explaining the perceived understanding of rights by young women shows the kind of view that older women in the women’s movements had about young women, and this lay behind the contestation of spaces.

The honest truth was that young women were excited about their newly found voice and power, and wanted by all means to exercise their agency and bring about transformation – in the spaces where they found themselves. They too were feminist, no ifs or buts – exactly what OSISA had taught them! These young sisters believed, very strongly, that they had the power to rekindle the dying flames in the women’s rights movements. They trusted in their own power to do this across ages, cultures and narratives.

Young women had to take a stand and negotiate for space. I still remember speaking to one of the political leaders of the opposition party who told me that sometimes the door is never going to invite...
women in, and so the best option is to break down the door and “bulldoze” spaces. She also explained to me that nothing is handed down on a silver platter, but that young women had to work for their legacy so as to leave a mark in the women’s movements. The sisters who were supported by the OSISA campaign simply did that. In some instance it was messy and left a lot of wounds, but in some instances it was a diplomatic and strategic process.

A good example would be the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe that ended up having a Young Feminist Leaders space, where the young sisters would come and deliberate on issues affecting them. It was initially viewed as a “little girls” space, but eventually it became well-respected. Another strategy was that the young feminist chose some of the older women as mentors and this somewhat “diluted” their wrath when dealing with young feminists. In South Africa, the young sisters were constantly referred to as “mafikizolo”, but eventually there was some integration as the older sisters began to realise their brilliance and hard work in the various social movements.

Three waves of feminism and the young women’s movements in Southern Africa

Wilson (nd) describes three waves of feminism. The first wave, which was the genesis, covered in the 1830s and focused a lot on issues to do with the abolition of the slave trade and also women’s rights. The second wave, from 1966 to 1979, is said to have “heightened” feminist consciousness and focused on “anti-discrimination policies and equal privileges”. The third wave, which is attributed mostly to what are known as the millennials (children born in the 2000s – or simply those who are so at heart) can be said to be defined by queer theory, and can be regarded as all-encompassing, diverse, and going beyond dualities (including what they represent).

I would like to believe that the input of the OSISA-led young feminist leadership was closely related to this third wave. The young women did not disregard the journeys that the older feminists had taken. They knew that they stood on the shoulders of great feminist giants, but wanted to further the feminist ideology by heightening the feminist causes in their own ways. However, this reality was not easy to understand amongst the sisters of varying maturity and diversity in the women’s movements in Southern Africa.

The fourth wave of feminism

This is simply the utilisation of new information and communication technologies as an alternative to physical space, to mobilise, organise and facilitate the eradication of patriarchy as an ideology. Cochrane (2013) defines the fourth wave of feminism as a movement connected through technology. Broadly, such movements focus on calling out misogyny and sexism online. The young feminist leaders who were alumni of the OSISA-led Young Women’s Voices Campaign understood this quite well. There have been many initiatives online to call out patriarchal tendencies and to ensure women’s safety. Sometimes the young women use technology to amplify their voice and work.
This was such a brilliant campaign for young feminist leaders, and for the women’s movements in Southern Africa. OSISA continues to promote feminist leadership, including through this BUWA! journal. The journey, however, has not been easy, not just for the young feminist sisters but for the women’s movement as a whole.

as an alternative to the other ways of mobilising and organising. An outstanding initiative born out of an alumni from the Young Women’s Voices Campaign is Pepeta, which was spearheaded by Talent Jumo, co-founder of Katswe Sisterhood (a feminist organisation working on young women’s sexual reproductive health and rights). Another young sister using online activism to amplify herself and her work is Nyasha Sengayi, who leads the One Billion Rising Movement in Zimbabwe. Her Facebook page is a clear space where she mobilises for activism. These are just two of the very many young women who are part of the fourth wave of feminism and are OSISA alumni.

Regarding the contestations of ageism and building consensus and waves of feminisms, it took a very long time of jostling, back‑biting, ageism and all sorts of obstacles to have a somewhat cohesive women’s movement that included the young sisters. OSISA itself was not spared the finger‑pointing, as they were viewed as challenging the status quo with their young feminist leadership rhetoric. It was difficult and there was quite a lot of fragmentation that came with negotiating for space. The current reality is that the women’s movement in Southern Africa has a plethora of energies, and these are a mixed bag of both the young and the older sisters.

Although more can be done, it is encouraging to acknowledge this journey and the struggles involved. However, what is even important is that these spaces that we now see were not a given, but were much contested, and that had a lot to do with the politics of space, voice and power. To amplify their voice, power and agency, some of the young feminists leaders started movements and organisations that today are part of the women’s movements for human rights in Southern Africa.

Young feminist leadership: Celebrating the sherloes

Below are some of the vibrant initiatives born out of the young women who were part of the OSISA-led Young Women’s Voices Campaign. These young women came from the different spaces created by OSISA to foster solidarity and enhance capacity of young women feminist leaders. Some of them were from the Feminist Leadership Trainings, some from the Southern African Young Women’s Festival, and some from the PowerUp! Young Feminist Leadership Coaching. What is of paramount importance is that this initiative by OSISA of the Young Women’s Voices Campaign managed to ignite flames from the sparks.

There is Glanis Changachirere, who is the leader of Institute of Young Women Development, working with young women to facilitate political participation and accountability in governance. In Zambia, there is Generation Alive and the Youth Advocacy Action Team that work with young feminists on leadership and sexual and reproductive health, both co‑founded by alumna Nana Zulu. The Girl Empowerment Network in Malawi works to eradicate child marriage. The Swaziland Young Women’s Network founded by Hleli Luhlanga works with young women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The African Woman Leadership Academy in Botswana, through the leadership of Lillian Nkosazana Moremi, is doing amazing work working with young women in mentorship, skills training, and network opportunities. These are some of the many examples of young women who are alumni of the OSISA-led Young Women’s Voices Campaign. These young women have managed to breathe new life into the various women’s movements in Southern Africa. The work has not been easy, but they fought a fierce battle, and today they too are feminist giants that other growing sisters can refer to.

In Southern Africa, young women have been at the centre of breathing new life into the women’s movements, and this has been more of a negotiated space than a simple given. The young feminist leaders have often come together to inspire one another as the tensions grew at various levels, and sometimes they felt like giving up. However, their persistence eventually paid off. Today the women’s movement in Southern Africa is alive, and much better than what defined the movement when the OSISA study was conducted.

It is good to reflect on the progress made so far, and also hold onto the hope that the future looks bright with more aspirations – and possibilities, not just for the alumni but also for those who have worked with – both within and outside the women’s movements. OSISA did a sterling job not only with me but very many of us, and the fruit of their labor lives on as testimony to this great work.

Conclusion

The OSISA-led Young Women’s Voices Campaign has been one of the most useful, comprehensive and holistic tools to enhance feminist leadership development in Southern African women’s movements. The various programmes that were developed have managed to facilitate the enhancement of over 200 young women’s feminist
journeys. Although the campaign ended in 2014, I write as a proud alumna who has reaped the rewards and benefits of being part of such a wonderful initiative.

This was such a brilliant campaign for young feminist leaders, and for the women’s movements in Southern Africa. OSISA continues to promote feminist leadership, including through this BUWA! journal. The journey, however, has not been easy, not just for the young feminist sisters but for the women’s movement as a whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace Ruvimbo Chirenje is a feminist known for her magnanimous African energy and strong dedication to her work. She is the youth advisor at Action Aid International Uganda. Her background is humanities. She holds an Honors degree in African languages and culture, a Masters degree in leadership and management, and a PhD in gender, feminism and sexualities (with a minor in leadership). Grace’s passion is working with young people and facilitating for their highest level of human potential development. She is a writer, mother, wife, sister, talk-show host and lives full life. Grace loves reading, body combat, aerobics, swimming and communing with nature.

REFERENCES


SEE ALSO


SUMMARY OF THE AFRICAN YOUTH CHARTER

The African Youth Charter is a political and legal framework, which serves the purpose of providing a strategic framework and direction for youth empowerment and development activities at continental, regional and national levels across Africa. The Charter is inline with the efforts of the African Union Commission to provide an avenue for effective youth participation in development process and is part of the efforts to implement the AUC’s Strategic Plan (2004-2007), which is geared towards its own institutional transformation, to strengthen its outreach within the continent and improve its working relationship with regional economic communities and international development partners.

The Charter defines youth as any individual between the ages of 15-35 years. This puts to rest the age long argument of defining the youth within the African context and based on Africa’s development realities. It took into consideration provisions and successes of previous declarations, Plan of Action and charters particularly, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the NEPAD Strategic Framework for Youth, the World Programme of Action for youth and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The African Youth Charter was informed by a research on the state of the African Youth, which was commissioned by the African Union Commission and has undergone various stages of development. An initial youth and experts meeting held in January 2006, to discuss the first draft of the document and various recommendations and amendments to its content were suggested. After the initial discussions, the draft charter was sent to member states for national consultations with youth and youth organisations. During May 22-28, youth, experts and ministers met at the AU Headquarters in Addis Ababa to discuss the final draft of the charter to make amendments and adopt the charter. After critical discussions, the charter was adopted by youth, experts and ministers. The charter was finally endorsed by Heads of government at their meeting in Banjul in July 2006.

Key issues affecting youth in the areas of employment, sustainable livelihood, education, skills development, health, youth participation, national youth policy, peace and security, law enforcement, youth in the Diaspora and youth with disabilities, among others, are adequately addressed within the framework of the Charter. It calls on state parties to ensure the freedom of movement, expression, private life and property.

- **On National Youth Policies**, the Charter calls on member states to develop cross sectoral policies and programmes, which take into consideration the inter-relatedness of the needs of youth with a view to integrating and mainstreaming the perspectives of youth into decision making and development processes.
- **On Participation**, it calls on state parties to guarantee the participation of youth in parliament and other national decision making bodies as well as facilitate the establishment or strengthening of national, regional and continental platforms for youth participation.
- **On Sustainable livelihood and youth employment**, state parties shall ensure the availability of accurate data on youth employment, unemployment and underemployment so as to facilitate the prioritisation of the issue in national development programmes and promote youth entrepreneurship by including entrepreneurship training in the school curricula, providing access to credit, business development skills training, mentorship opportunities and better information on market opportunities.
- **On Health**, state parties shall take measures to make available equitable and ready access to medical assistance and health care especially in rural and poor urban areas with an emphasis on the development of primary health care and institute comprehensive programmes to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS by providing education, information, communication and awareness creation as well as making protective measures and reproductive health services available.
- **On Youth in the Diaspora**, the Charter calls for the establishment of structures and networks that encourage and assist the youth in the Diaspora to return to and fully reintegrate into the social and economic life in Africa and promote and protect the rights of young people living in the Diaspora.
- **On Girls and young women**, the charter calls for the introduction of legislative measures that eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls and young women and ensure their human rights and fundamental freedoms and ensure that girls and young women are able to participate actively, equally and effectively with boys at all levels of social, educational, economic, political, cultural, civic life and leadership as well as scientific endeavours.
The charter outlines a number of responsibilities for the African Union Commission and Youth. The AUC by the provisions of the charter will collaborate with governmental, nongovernmental institutions and developmental partners to identify best practices on youth policy formulation and implementation and encourage the adaptation of principles and experiences among States Parties, as well as invite States Parties to include youth representatives as part of their delegations to the ordinary sessions of the African Union and other relevant meetings of the policy organs to broaden the channels of communication and enhance the discussion of youth-related issues. Youth are being expected to contribute to the promotion of the economic development of their countries and the continent by placing their intellectual and physical abilities at its service. The African Youth Charter is a unique opportunity to unite the youth movement in Africa to speak the same language and move along the same strategic programming lines.

**SOURCE**

EDITOR
Alice D Kanengoni

EDITORIAL TEAM
Tsitsi Fungurani, Levison Kabwato, Dr Hleziphi N Nyanungo

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Richard Benza, Bukeka Mkhosi, Luc Kitunka

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Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA)
PRESIDENT PLACE 1 Hood Avenue / 148 Jan Smuts Avenue (corner of Bolton), ROSEBANK 2196 / Johannesburg
PO Box 678, WITS 2050 / Johannesburg
Tel: +27 (0) 11 587 5000 / Fax: +27 (0) 11 587 5099

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TITLE CONCEPT: Buwa! is an adaption of the Suthu ‘bua’ meaning ‘speak’.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Vuyiseka Dubula of Sonke Gender Justice addresses the audience during the Ahmed Kathrada memorial at St. Georges Cathedral in Cape Town. 6 April 2017. Credit: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp.

The views and opinions expressed in this journal are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the editor, OSISA or its board.

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SPECIAL NOTE: Photography plays an important role in how women are represented in publications. We encourage authors to approach organisations, institutions and photographers to supply content-appropriate photographic material when submitting articles.
“...in the classic folktale of the fight between the elephant and the hippopotamus, it is said that the elephant was unstoppable when charging, but the hippo was immovable when it stood its ground. Similarly, the influence of the patriarchy, unstoppable as it seems, must be met with the force of an immovable object through progressive feminism.” Resego Natalie Kgosidintsi
ABOUT BUWA!

Guided by the feminist principle that ‘the personal is political’, BUWA! is a journal published by the OSISA Women’s Rights Programme annually. BUWA! services as a tool and platform to explore a variety of themes and topics that are pertinent to African women today. The journal receives both commissioned and unsolicited articles primarily from women on the African continent. An editorial team decides on the themes and topics, and participates in the editorial process. The publication seeks to promote open society ideals through providing a platform for women’s voices, amplifying these across the continent and beyond. BUWA! also explores African women’s experiences through a policy lens, to shed light on international, regional, national, and local debates and policies that shape women’s choices and lived experiences.

BUWA! ONLINE

BUWA! is published by the Women’s Rights programme of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). The title BUWA! is an adaptation of the SeSotho word ‘bua’ meaning ‘speak’.

We would appreciate feedback on this publication using the #Buwa8 tag on any of the following platforms:

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- Comment on the BUWA! feature on the OSISA website at www.osisa.org
- Like us and comment on our facebook page @OpenSocietyInitiative.SouthernAfrica and join the conversation on Twitter @osisa
The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) is a growing African institution committed to deepening democracy, protecting human rights and enhancing good governance in the region. OSISA’s vision is to promote and sustain the ideals, values, institutions and practices of open society, with the aim of establishing vibrant and tolerant southern African democracies in which people, free from material and other deprivation, understand their rights and responsibilities and participate actively in all spheres of life.

In pursuance of this vision, OSISA’s mission is to initiate and support programmes working towards open society ideals, and to advocate for these ideals in southern Africa. This approach involves looking beyond immediate symptoms, in order to address the deeper problems - focusing on changing underlying policy, legislation and practice, rather than on short-term welfarist interventions. Given the enormity of the needs and challenges in the region it operates in - and acknowledging that it cannot possibly meet all of these needs - OSISA, where appropriate, supports advocacy work by its partners in the respective countries, or joins partners in advocacy on shared objectives and goals.

In other situations, OSISA directly initiates and leads in advocacy interventions, along the key thematic programmes that guide its work. OSISA also intervenes through the facilitation of new and innovative initiatives and partnerships, through capacity-building initiatives as well as through grant making.

Established in 1997, OSISA works in 10 southern Africa countries: Angola, Botswana, DRC, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. OSISA works differently in each of these 10 countries, according to local conditions. OSISA is part of a network of autonomous Open Society Foundations, established by George Soros, located in Eastern and Central Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the US.