



# CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION AND STEREOTYPE: **THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN MOBILISING ATTENTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

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**T**o break interesting cover stories, journalists report from conflict areas and sometimes at the risk of their own lives and/or at the mercy of the powerful in society. So in many newsrooms, such 'hardcore' journalism is left to the men while female journalists are relegated to writing compassionate and 'soft' feature stories. However, with the advent of new media platforms, women are increasingly turning to social media as a medium of communication.

Patricia Kahill, a social media content creator, marketer, blogger and owner of Kahill Insights, says the biggest contribution of social media to the world of communication is the evasion of censorship. 'Self-publishing (on social media) is easy because you share what you want and publish on a free tool without being censored,' she says.

The blogger has a huge following on social media: 11,296 followers on Twitter and 979 followers on Instagram. She has written extensively

about charity, business and entrepreneurship.

In 2015, Kahill was involved in the #EndTeenagePregnancy campaign by Straight Talk Foundation. She put together a team of writers and in two months they had written and published 270 blogs, stories about teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

### How the new media works

There is a huge thirst for information among the public. Unfortunately, some information that is good for public consumption does not meet the editorial standards of established media houses or the news demands of the mass public. This is the niche that the social media bloggers are filling. Instead of waiting for approval from their supervisors about what stories are 'hot' and need to be written about, women, using social media, air their views, ideas, and the challenges they face in day-to-day life.

A few months ago, for example, a Makerere University research fellow, Dr Stella Nyanzi, undressed in public to express her discontent about her working conditions and harassment by her employer. While mainstream media ignored the build-up to the incident because, maybe, it was considered not newsworthy, the don took to social media, especially Facebook where she has a big following, to discuss her plight with the wider public. And with 6,226 followers on Twitter, Dr Nyanzi's video was within minutes all over the internet. All the mainstream media could do was follow the crowd.

The traditional news industry is largely run by men and so they control the direction of the news, the editorial policy and the finances. However, as traditional mainstream media continues to shrink, digital media platforms seem to be the new way to go.

'Young women need to engage more intensively on social media with knowledge and ideas that benefit all categories of people,' Kahill says, adding, 'that's the way to break the stereotypes.'

However, social media has its own shortfalls. There is plenty of informa-

tion available for the public but this comes with a very low chance of fact-checking. It is, therefore, important that social media activists keep an eye on giving the audience good content.

'Not all of us can pick up a camera to take a picture or a pen to write and run a blog,' says Amina Babirye, a sports photojournalist with Kawowo Sports Media Limited. 'It is therefore important that one learns a skill, there is just no excuse for not getting better and cutting a niche in this fast-moving digital world.'

### Activists using ICT to create awareness

Last year 2015, during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence (GBV), Women of Uganda Network (WOUNGNET) ran an SMS campaign raising awareness on GBV.

Patricia Nyasuna, Programme Assistant, Gender and ICT, at WOUNGNET says they realised that most middle-class women are using social media on different platforms – Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – and so utilised the social media platforms to reach more women. 'When a woman creates awareness about something, other women usually agree with her. It builds their confidence. Using the SMS platform, women got our message about knowing the signs of GBV and where to report.'

WOUNGNET got massive responses, especially from university students, among whom several GBV cases are reported. 'And because of that success, we are planning to have the same campaign to create awareness among women in rural areas,' says Nyasuna. WOUNGNET has 2,678 likes on Facebook and 3,144 followers and 782 likes on Twitter, which they believe will help reach women from far and wide.

### The challenges of the new media

With social media, exposure to the mass public is instant, which is good but in a way limited as campaigns about women's empowerment on social media only help the middle-class woman who has a smart phone and access to the internet.

Social media activists also have to contend with unscrupulous readers who seek to silence them. 'Sometimes as the originator of the message you are not sure how the women will react. Some block us,' Nyasuna says.

There are many social barriers that still exist about the gender roles of women, and some readers believe that women have no authority to comment on issues regarded as men's issues, such as politics.

There is also a misconception of the message being delivered. When Dr Nyanzi, for instance, launched her protest, many came out to condemn her for using a 'lewd' avenue to express her grievances. They questioned her morals before trying to understand the issues that pushed her to this extreme course of action.

The main basis for using social media as a medium of communication is to engage the public so as to obtain views and a diversity of opinions on the subject of discussion. However, female social media activists have to deal with sexist comments and harassment from trolls, especially from male followers. Most of the comments focus on physical appearance and writing style, instead of the substance in the article or text in question.