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## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES IN SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA**

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES IN SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA**

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*Titilayo Remilekun Osuagwu*

### **Introduction**

The accusation against the mainstream media is that they reinforce prejudice in society, especially against identity groups on the fringe of power or those perceived to be unusual. By the agenda they set, they instigate inequalities. To combat this, women, in response to suggestions from women empowerment advocates, have tried to leverage the use of internet-based communication to evade oppressive male domination. This Chapter, based on empirical evidence, demonstrates the extent to which changing media landscape has enhanced dissemination of information, education, ideology, and entertainment contents that deepen women's peculiar needs and interests in the society. Relying essentially on Kramarae's muted group theory, the chapter examines the case of 500 purposively selected women in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria direction attention to opportunities and challenges confronting women in their use of social media. The chapter establishes that gender imbalances abound in terms of access to the internet. Conscious interventions in media and information literacy, interpersonal and group communications that help overcome muteness and bring about genuine women empowerment are advocated.

### **Background**

There have been calls for a just and equitable world where all members of the society are seen and treated as a complementary entity. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (or global goals) is the universally agreed template for addressing challenges facing humankind. The fifth of the SDGs (Goal 5) calls for empowerment of girls and women such that their rights would equate those of men. Moreover, Goal 10 further resonates with the need for the equality of all humanity for genuine progress (Sustainable Development Goals, 2019).

The rhetoric of women's empowerment has not been translated into practical positive action in much of the developing nations of the world, unlike the advanced ones (Bayeh, 2016). In Nigeria, discrimination is manifest in political and economic, education, healthcare and employment spheres. Similarly, there is a preponderance of harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) violence against women and early/forced marriage (Duru, 2013; Mutua & Tibeso, 2013). Data on rape, especially of the girl-child, female adolescents and other categories of women are on the increase. Women decision-making regarding career choice, business investment options, contraceptive use and property inheritance are largely hindered by male partners, religions and cultural practices.

Conventional media often help in perpetuating inequality in society as females are either under represented or misrepresented in the media; women are also stereo typically portrayed (Duru, 2013; Campbell et al., 2014; Vu et al., 2018; Sink et al., 2018; Speno & Aubrey, 2018). Since the advent of internet-based communication, advocates of social media for women ( Rajendran, 2015; Gutierrez, 2017; Tattai, 2019) have been calling on women to harness the opportunities of the social media to overcome the challenge of male domination. For instance, conversations about women on Twitter have increased by 300%, according to Tattai (2019), birthing the hashtags revolution and concomitant online campaigns that have helped women in finding a voice. However, in spite of the potentials of social media for human empowerment, gender inequality seems not to have abated, particularly in developing countries where the over 60% of uneducated women equally lack access to the Internet (Kelleher, 2014; Dalida, 2017). Keller (2014) observes that women's literacy is a vital component of women empowerment and that the social media are less a tool of women empowerment in the developing countries because of illiteracy and lack of access to technology. Keller (2014) describes the situation thus, "A woman's ability is also increasingly dependent on the written word in a technology-driven world where smartphones are ubiquitous, and illiteracy limits her to only basic levels of engagement."

### **Statement of the Problem**

Women's empowerment is an essential component of societal advancement. When women are not empowered to add their voice to issues of national interest, development is impeded and becomes unsustainable (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006; Shah, 2008; Kabeer, 2015; Bayeh, 2016). The advent of new media technology led to the expectation that the visibility of women in the scheme of things would increase. Although the advent of social media represents a milestone in the struggle for women's empowerment, women still experience stereotypes that hinder their empowerment, thus undermining the potentials of online media for women's empowerment. This chapter represents an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate of influences of social media on women empowerment, based on empirical data. Critical issues interrogated in this chapter are: What are the most frequently used social media by women in South-South Nigeria? Do women in the South-South use social media for their empowerment? What are the opportunities for using social media for women's empowerment in the South-South? What are the challenges of using social media for women's empowerment in the south-south?

### **Literature Review**

Discussion in this chapter is anchored on the muted group theory. Kramae (1981), a feminist theorist relates communication to power and argues that the masculine gender controls communication through the use of language. Besides, the dominance of men in the media and communication industries has hampered women's voices, and largely excluded them from decision-making, thus culminating in their muteness; McQuail, 2011; Griffin, 2012). Chervis

Kramae demonstrated the muteness of women through their portrayal in cartoons. She showed that only a few cartoon characters were females and who was depicted in emotional, vague and having apologetic language. On the other hand, male cartoon characters are often associated with forcefulness and boldness (Griffin, 2012). As McQuail (2011) points out, all entertainment contents for women are loaded with patriarchal ideologies and can never "be liberating" or empowering (p.344). Allaire & Chen (2018), have echoed the same line of thought about patriarchal ideologies as they noted that there was the belief that women should not access education and should not have the right to speak in the gathering of men and women because they are "fragile, emotional, frivolous, and incapable of rational or abstract thinking" (p.37). Osuagwu (2018) further noted that gender differentiation is responsible for unequal opportunities in society. Still, Odenweller & Rittenour (2017, p.57) observed that despite the efforts of feminism to attain equality in both private and public spheres, "prejudicial acts" and stereotypes still allow sexism to persist.

Cowan (2007) argues that muteness is not only the absence of voice; it involves situations where subordinate groups are allowed to communicate only within the confines of the dominant group. It includes when less dominant groups have their voices censored, ignored, overlooked, trivialised and rendered invisible. Cowan (2007) argues further that muteness does not refer to the absence of voice but to a kind of distortion where subordinate or low voices are allowed to speak only in the confines of the dominant communication system. Ohaja (2015), citing Ekwelie (2005), also argues that beyond the media, society generally used words to favour men. For example, words like 'Adonis' in Greek stands for a male, eligible bachelor, master and wizard. On the other hand, terms like 'nymphet' (a Greek word) is often used to describe a female that sleeps around, spinster and witch all of which portray women in inferior positions, thus casting them in a negative light and maintaining the status quo of male dominance (Ohaja, 2015).

West & Turner (2010) proposed several ways of overcoming silencing and changing the status quo; reclaiming the communication arena by elevating and celebrating women's discourse; and creating new language systems that are inclusive of gendered words based on experiences of the marginalised group. Finally, the use of both traditional and modern media are critical to redressing the gender imbalance. The proposal has worked in some climes, while in some, it has not. Duru (2013, p.44) echoes the same opinion in stating that "gender ideology in Africa is complex, and in many ways are different from other parts of the world." In Nigeria, patriarchal ideologies are still mainly perpetrated. In some cultures, communication is still mostly gendered. There are instances of men and women representing the same signs/symbols differently and some societies forbid women from using the language forms meant for men.

Tannen (1992) criticised the muted group theory in stating that different communication styles among men and women account for power imbalance, which is in contrast to the theory's assumption that men are always trying to control women. Furthering the argument, she pointed out that the assumption about men's motives is very cumbersome and misleading as bad intention, whether real or implied, could when misconstrued, mean the plan to dominate (Tannen, 1992; Griffin, 2012). Given, Kramarae condemned Tannen's defense of men's abuse of power as naivety as she insisted that gender hierarchy pervades every sector of society (Griffin, 2012). In consequence, men and women hold different perceptions of each other.

Do gender relations in social media communication support the muted group theory? First, inequality is perpetuated in every sphere of life both in content and in form. Social media may be setting the antecedents of creating a genderless communication sphere by shattering the status

quo. Second, the theory seems apt to the discussion because it gives practical relevance to the call on women to leverage on social media and participate in activities that would upturn the status quo by adding their voice to germane issues in society. In this regard, women could be demonstrating their potentialities for using social media to create institutions that further their cause, thereby liberating them from oppressive cultural norms. Thirdly, this theory was is a model for understanding communication stereotypes against women and how these stereotypes may inhibit their empowerment through social media. Finally, the argument has helped to emphasize consciousness creation. Littlejohn (1999) adds to this contention by suggesting that women should resist muteness by creating alternative views to men's opinions to bridge power inequality in communication.

### **Concept of Women's Empowerment**

There are several definitions of empowerment, which is often seen as the right to access available opportunities and make decisions about them. It means the operation that gives people power not only on their own lives but on their communities and society as well (Rahman, 2013). Women's empowerment. Refers to the vital process that enables women to acquire social, economic and political resources for previously denied life choices. Kabeer (2005) defines women's empowerment as the procedure that allows women to evolve, revive their abilities and what they can achieve in areas they earlier were disallowed and neglected. In this regard, empowerment does not only allow women; it equips them with tools with which to contribute to solving different societal problems (Bayeh, 2016). Economic and social choices pertain education, profession, lifestyle and all other means that enable women to obtain income and participate in financial decision-making, while political decisions include the opportunity for participation in politics and general decision making (Kabeer,2011; Duflo, 2012; Rahman, 2013; The United Nations Development Programme. (2018).).

### **Social Media and Women's Empowerment**

*The high rate of internet access in the 20th century has offered women the opportunity for self-empowerment. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, are often perceived to be empowering women by helping to air their opinions about equal rights through collective actions in online activism and campaigns as well as aid their education through blogging and e-learning and generally helping them realise their potentials (Churchyard, 2009; Sutton & Pollock, 2000; Radovic-Markovic, Nelson-Porter & Omolaja, 2012; Stephan, 2013; McVeigh, 2013; Gutierrez, 2017). The Dr. Oby Ezekwesili's #Bringbackourgirls' online campaign is a ready example of women's social media activism for empowerment. The campaign helped in calling global attention to the abducted schoolgirls in the village of Chibok, North-Eastern Nigeria. There is also the trending #istanwithbusoladakolo, a movement against sexual abuse, similar to the #metoo movement in the United States (protesting sexual assaults against women); and #AintNoCinderella in India "to show that women do not have a particular curfew to which they have to adhere (like Cinderella did)" (Pandey, 2017). There is also the #shedeforsheforum in the Philippines, a forum that is highlighting women supporting themselves through different engagements that make them visible as actors of their development (Phillippine Primer, 2017)is another example.(SHOULD THAT PHRASE BE DELETED)*

Campbell et al. (2005) in espousing the role of social media in women empowerment, argued that alternative narratives that are enabled by the internet have "offered a more nuanced way of negotiating identities..." (p.247). Social media also silences misogynistic tendencies. A ready example is the backlash on Senator Chibo's assault on a female shop attendant in Nigeria. Thus

social media have helped in spreading pro-feminism messages as topics about women are becoming prominent on social media daily.

Further, Tatai (2019) observed that social media have led to an increase in feminist conversation on Twitter more than ever before as they have proven to be very powerful in terms of raising awareness and mobilising campaigns on a variety of issues beyond their usage for social networking. The internet has helped in building fandom relationship between media users that bridges distance among them and has helped in the development of cult status. It creates a social status and gives room for participation (Ross, 2008). Thus social issues have social audiences surrounding them. Their attribute of immediacy has aided women's rights activists in drawing attention to women's empowerment and women's rights issues such as discrimination, gender inequalities and negative stereotypes. In contrast, Osuagwu (2015) observed that there is limited research interest on the extent to which young females use social media for pro-feminist causes.

Other scholars like Sutton & Pollock (2000) and Morahan-Martin (2000) have argued that social media communication have been used to silence and disempower women as it has led to a rise in the exploitation of women as well as have put their lives at risk. A study carried out in 2010 indicated that 73% of women had been victims of online abuse with the kinds of victimisation ranging from flaming, cyberstalking, online pornography, sexual harassment, physical threat, name-calling using demeaning words (Morahan-Martin, 2000). Gutierrez (2017) echoed the same sentiment about online abuse and argued that the nature of threats and attacks on women online are different from men's. The threats against women are one, sexually-related, two, meant to assert dominance, three, silence and intimidate them. She submits that social media have been used to spread misogyny and have encouraged some sexists to participate online because hateful comments receive more likes actively.

Carr (2012) observed that social media activism has limits, labelled as "slacktivism.", a digital form of activism that has no meaningful impact though participants assume the illusion of effects as they only boosts their egos through such activism. Besides, Gladwell (2012), has argued that social media activism do not compare with actual activism that challenges the statusquo. The low-cost effort of liking, sharing and or retweeting substitutes the real action rather than compliment them (Ang & Hermes, 1991; Frissen, 1992; Davis, 2011). A study carried out by Vitak et al., (2011) has confirmed the 'slacktivism' model because there was no significant relationship between those who engaged in politics using Facebook and those who participated in it offline. Furthermore, too much variety on the internet leads to a "fragmented and divided society (Sunstein, 2006). Equally, information overload has diluted the use of media for influence (Mcquail, 2011). Finally, social media use among women entails the need to multitask by doing other things while engaging in media use (Mcquail, 2011). All these further make the extent of potential utilisation of social for women's empowerment unclear.

## **Method and materials**

Data presented in this chapter were generated through a survey research design conducted among women in Rivers and Bayelsa States in South-South Nigeria. The population of women in the two states is 3,356, 122, comprising 830,432 for Bayelsa and 2525,690 from Rivers. Survey design was adopted because it provided the most effective means of knowing the opinions of women concerning the opportunities and challenges of using social media for empowerment. Survey method entails drawing up questions for a selected audience to answer (Sobowale, 2008). The two states were selected using the simple random technique, using the balloting technique. The researcher chose only women because of the conviction that they would be able to respond to

questions that bothered on their empowerment. Having social media accounts was also considered a prerequisite for the study. The researcher obtained the figures from population.gov.ng, 2011. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan's sample prediction table, a sample size of 500 respondents was selected purposely from the two states. The research instrument was the questionnaire. The instrument has two sections designed to data on demographic variables and the research questions. A total of 500 copies of questionnaire were administered based on the strength of the respondents from each state. In other words, 300 copies were distributed in Rivers State, while two hundred copies were for Bayelsa. Out of the 500 copies administered, 392 copies (or 78.4%) were retrieved and found valid.

## **Results**

Data collected from the respondents indicated that 32% of the 392 respondents were within the age bracket of 20-24, 29% were within 25-29 years, 21% were within 30-34, while 18% respondents were 35 years and above. Majority of the respondents (31%) frequently use the Facebook, followed by WhatsApp (29%) Twitter (22%) and Instagram (5%).

Women in the selected states in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria use the social media for diverse reasons including interacting with friends (31%); sharing of photos (26%); identifying with friends (20%); and updating knowledge (13%). The less popular reasons are participating in women's discourse (7%); entrepreneurship (2%) and other (1%). This shows that social media are not engaged for women empowerment in the area of study.

Another vital question this study sought to address was to establish whether or not women in South-south perceived that social media offer opportunities for women's empowerment. The majority (62%) of the respondents disagreed, while only (29%) agreed, showing the low level of awareness on the potentials of social media for women empowerment. However, in response to another questionnaire item, 36% of respondents perceived that social media have provided opportunities for silencing patriarchal tendencies; spreading pro-feminist messages (29%); celebrating female heroines (27%); and activism (8%). Respondents further identified the challenges encountered in the use of social media for women's empowerment. Highlights of answers are choice of language (36%); lack of Internet access (15%) preponderances of Internet pornography (10%) and stalking (9%).

## **Discussion**

The advent of social media was received with high optimism by women empowerment advocates who see it as free media that give voice to the voiceless. Thus, research question one sought to find out the social media mostly used by women in the South-South Nigeria. Respondents affirmed that the Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform. This finding corroborates Nwafor et al.'s (2013) assertion that Facebook is the most popular platform among social media users in Nigeria. The result also support's Osuagwu's (2015) finding that females were the avid users of social media, especially Facebook.

Secondly, the perception of respondents on the potentials of social media platforms for women empowerment was investigated. The majority (62%) of the respondents disagreed, while only (29%) agreed, showing the low level of awareness on the potentials of social media for women empowerment. The implication is that the participants have not fully realised the potentials of social media for women empowerment. This study also shows the gratification women derived from engaging social media. These range from the view that social media have provided

opportunities for silencing patriarchal tendencies (36%); spreading pro-feminist messages (29%); celebrating female heroines (27%); and activism (8%). Of all these, the variable that measures empowerment scored the least. This finding resonates with the concerns of scholars like Vitak et al., (2011), Carr (2012) and Gladwell (2012) about the effectiveness of social media for female's empowerment. McQuail (2011) has argued that social media cannot yield any significant influence on people because of information overload. Gladwell et al. (2012) equally argued that social media activism is not genuine and cannot compare with actual activism.

The last research question addressed one of the critical variables of the study. It sought to know the challenges of using social media for women's empowerment. Respondents reported choice of language (36%); lack of Internet access (15%) preponderances of Internet pornography (10%) and stalking (9%) as key challenges. It is fascinating to note that the majority of the respondents saw the inhibition in language use as one of the challenges in use of social media for women's empowerment. This finding supports Kramarae's (1981) muted group theory that argues about language is used to perpetuate stereotype in society and further silence women. Women are not allowed to use words that depict their experiences, even when they are anonymous online; thus, the muteness continues.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has demonstrated that women in South-South Nigeria predominantly use Facebook for social interactions. They use it mainly for keeping in touch and not for empowerment purposes. Further, the study has also shown that muteness in the communication arena is a significant challenge to the use of social for genuine empowerment. Following the outcome of the study, the use of social media for interpersonal and group communications is recommended as pathway for overcoming muteness and paving the way for genuine empowerment of women. Real-life communication, as opposed to digital interaction, would help women initiate and engage with stakeholders to depict their experiences, enhance women visibility as well as project their voices. Women should make conscious efforts to embrace the use of social media for entrepreneurial purposes to address the lack of Internet access.

Although the findings here have established the opportunities and challenges of using social media for women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria, the study hopes that future research would take a broader perspective of studying more than just a zone. A comparative study of two zones too would be interesting. Still, future research could take a more in-depth methodology that involves survey and other research designs. In all, this study has helped in calling attention to an essential segment of the society, women. Similar future endeavours would help in realising the gender equity and empowerment as contained in the global SDGs.



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