



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Netherlands

**WE4L**  
Women Empowered for Leadership

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# Disenchanted or Demoralising?

## Zimbabwean Women Share Their Social Media Experiences

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for the Women Empowered for Leadership (WE4L) Programme

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Hivos

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# 1. Overview

## 1.1 Background

Hivos is currently implementing a five-year (2016-2020) Women Empowered for Leadership (WE4L) Programme, promoting women's political participation and leadership development in Southern Africa and the Middle East. The programme is managed by Hivos and implemented together with local partners in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Jordan and Lebanon. The programme aims to give women equal opportunities and the capacity to fully and meaningfully participate in political and societal decision-making processes. The programme believes that women should be recognised and supported by politics and society as leaders and agents of change. WE4L objectives are fourfold: (1) Seeing more women participating fully and effectively in politics and public administration at sub-national level; (2) Investing in female leaders, linked with women's rights organisations, have more influence on political and societal developments and on public opinion; (3) Supporting civic organisations, such as trade unions and political parties, promote full and equal participation of women in leadership positions and demonstrate a significant change in their own policies and practices; (4) Enabling more recognition and support from the general public for women in leadership positions<sup>1</sup>. This report is based on a three-month study focusing on the role of social media in breaking or making women leaders in Zimbabwe during the programme implementation period. WE4L has inspired and created platforms for women leaders in Southern Africa and the Middle East to become experts on issues and fields that have traditionally been dominated by men. This way, women experts have used their knowledge and experience to encourage other women to seek and take up leadership roles in key sectors of the societies that they have traditionally been underrepresented in. This research sought to uncover the effectiveness of social media as a tool for activism in promoting women leadership while also exploring social media's role in advancing or obstructing equal gender representation in Zimbabwean society.

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to analyse women's leadership dimensions in Zimbabwe, examining the extent to which social media influences societal dynamics. To gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of the issues under study, two research questions were employed:

- **What influence does social media have in positively promoting women leaders?**
- **To what extent is social media effective as a tool for activism among women leaders?**



## 1.3 Method

The report reviewed literature sources from both academic and policy sources while implementing Parsell and Bligh (1999)'s typical research report structure going by the acronym SIMRAD – Summary, Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion. Recommendations were also added as part of the report. Twenty women leaders were selected for structured interviews, which took place in face-to-face and telephone formats. These interviews were conducted between December 2019 and March 2020 in Zimbabwe's main cities Harare and Bulawayo. The sampled women participants are women leaders working in Zimbabwe. Interviewed participants included gender and civic society activists, aspiring political leaders, members of parliament, journalists and socialites. Data collection also consisted of online ethnographic explorations of sampled women-centric social media hashtags originating from the Zimbabwean digital space. Popular women-led Twitter hashtags were assessed in an online ethnographic assessment that took place in January 2020. Hashtags included in the assessment were #RuvhenekoChallenge, #DhukuforTuku, #OurBodiesNotWarZones, #SheSpeaksOut, #InjureOneInjureAll, #WomenUnlimited, #YellowCampaign, #WCW and #ChigumbaChallenge. With the interviews, we were able to unpack the effects of social media on women leaders' societal progression or regression, while online ethnography gave a true picture of interactions emerging from the social media hashtags mostly run or driven by women agendas.



Figure 1 : Map of Zimbabwe Source : Infoplease Atlas

## 1.4 Context

Zimbabwe bordered by South Africa in the south, Botswana in the West, Mozambique in the East and Zambia to the north, is a landlocked nation located in southern Africa. About sixty percent of Zimbabwe's estimated fifteen million people are women, seventy per cent of whom are said to be living in poverty (Moyo, 2019). Using data from We Are Social and Hootsuite, Zimbabwe's information technology publication TechZim reported in 2019 that "the number of active social media subscribers grew by 20% from 0.88 million users in 2018 to 1.2 million this year" (Mudzingwa, 2019). Only one woman is named in the fastest-growing category of Zimbabwe's leading social media personalities. Statistics by Social Bakers identify female recording artist Ammara Brown among the popular personalities on Facebook, but no woman features in the country's top 10 personalities with the largest audience. This list is dominated by business, religious and entertainment personalities including Strive Masiyiwa, Emmanuel Makandiwa and Jah Prayzah. Still, according to Social Bakers only two Zimbabwean women, Hollywood actress Danai Gurira and socialite Pokello Nare, feature on a top 10 list of Zimbabwe's most popular and most followed Twitter accounts. Yet social media is giving Zimbabwean women a space to speak up, offering them a platform to speak out against a number of issues such as sexual abuse. For example, in January 2019, most women took to social media using hashtags, such as #OurBodiesNotWarZones, #SheSpeaksOut and #InjureOneInjureAll, to protest against alleged

accusations of rape and sexual assaults that were levelled against Zimbabwean military personnel. The fact that women can use social media to demonstrate against the military, an all-important institution in the country, is making some women see and believe in the potential of digital platforms to facilitate dissent and change. Based on the interviews conducted as part of this research, the majority of women agreed that the most important social media platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram, in that order of popularity according to the Zimbabwean situation. Their interconnectedness makes cross-platform digital activism possible. Several women's organisations in Zimbabwe continue to use social media as a tool to make informed decisions in their day-to-day life, bolster, inspire and campaign for women's empowerment, encourage women to be active in socio-political activities, resist gender-based stereotypes and also enable their voices to be heard in Zimbabwe and beyond.

## 1.5 Executive Summary

In 2011, the United Nations declared Internet access as a basic human right. Facts on the ground however still show growth on mobile technology has been disproportionately weighted in favour of richer countries in the West. For example, recent research conducted by Taylor and Silver (2019) showed ninety per cent or more South Koreans, Israelis and Dutch citizens owning a smartphone while only sixty per cent of South Africans or about forty per cent in Kenya and Nigeria had a smartphone, which does not equate to having Internet access. Yet, things are changing slightly in Zimbabwe, where, according to Plecher (2018), around a third of the overall population is living in urban areas. With technological access in Africa mostly concentrated at urban areas, it is fair to see why Internet accessibility in Zimbabwe has been rising modestly over the last few years, with government's latest figures suggesting 8.7 of Zimbabwe's roughly 16 million people had access to the Internet in 2019, a 25 percent rise from the previous year (Newsday, 2019). It is against this backdrop that this research sought to examine the dynamics of social media use in Zimbabwe using the southern African nation's women leaders as a point of departure.



Findings from 20 interviews with women leaders and a digital ethnographic assessment of selected social media pages show the overall attitudes to social media use among women leaders being overwhelmingly positive. There is a general consensus among women leaders in Zimbabwe that social media is fast becoming an agent of change. While one women leaders even struggled to identify something catastrophic or negative about social media, others experienced social media differently and this report will detail these varied experiences. Social media platforms are thus providing a rallying call for Zimbabwean women, allowing them to interact with each other and reaching a wider audience never seen before. They have been left empowered by opportunities to interact with a wider base where they get various viewpoints on issues that affect them. They credit social media for exposing them to a more diverse world, for allowing them to construct positive images of themselves and helping build and strengthening long-lasting friendships.

Findings also showed that being tied to digital or new media platforms facilitated women's actions politically and socially. Social media has thus proven to be an important tool for women's empowerment in Zimbabwe. They contended that social media is allowing them to craft new ways of digital activism, bolstering grassroots conversations among activists while others are using social media platforms as trusted podiums for news updates. More importantly, social media was allowing them to connect with old and new friends, thereby offering a chance to create genuine friendships through participation in similar interest groups. Social media networking opportunities were helping others find jobs or get exposed to critical information, they said, with others using these digital platforms to seek and establish enduring business contacts.

While a phenomenal increase in the use of online social media (OSM) and Internet was recorded in Zimbabwe in 2019, many of the nation's citizens, like much of Africa, however, have to contend with persistent load-shedding, extortionate airtime and data costs.

These problems are compounded in Zimbabwe, where thanks to an underperforming economy, many especially women and the youth, have been left without jobs. Statistics show that more men than women use social media in Zimbabwe, proving the dominance, power and influence of men is not limited to offline societal contents, but is unfortunately also digital.

That social media is a powerful educational resource that should be harnessed by pro-women organisations in Zimbabwe is arguably an undisputed fact. Tag a Life International Trust (TaLI), headed by Ms Nyarai Mashayamombe is an excellent example of a pro-women group that is taking to social media to actively campaign and empower young women and girls in Zimbabwe. Still, to guard against potential disconnection caused by digital inequalities, this report recommends that digital dissemination in local vernacular is encouraged. Funding from the government, the civic society and private sources should also be made available to promote inclusive digital participation among vulnerable groups, like rural-based women and youth.

Research has shown that technology not only directly impacts women's development, but it has also enabled their voice to reach out to likeminded individuals and groups, a key finding that was also confirmed by this report. Interview participants pointed to the power of technology, arguing that it has the ability to unite them while an assessment of social media hashtags showed the power of sharing a message. The endless stream of virality and exponential message growth that Twitter creates allowed women to stand up and be counted in their communities through online activism.

However, while some women leaders consider social media a fun and unfiltered platform for self-expression in a many-to-many communication format, they were quick to point that the Zimbabwean Twitter-sphere is a particularly ruthless battleground, especially for women. Use of abusive language and harassment towards women are notably common, forcing some to self-censor their content or stay away altogether.

At the same time, notable penetration of social media services among women has had several detrimental effects on their welfare, caused either by or leading to the propagation of, for example, false information and hate speech along with the shaming of individuals or groups especially on gender lines. For some women, participating in social media deliberations comes at a heavy price. Some women prefer to stay digitally disconnected, because the online environment can be hostile to women and girls as it exposes them to bullying, this report established. Social media platforms had opened floodgates for women to be targeted for harassment because of their gender, as evidenced by an ethnographic assessment of selected women-focused social media hashtags. Moreover, social media platforms have become notable avenues for the spread of misinformation as more women consume news through participatory channels such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. More specifically, the Twittersphere in Zimbabwe remained largely elitist in nature compared to Facebook and WhatsApp. For example, hashtag participants and initiators are mostly well-known figures in the society, such as journalists, activists, lawyers and politicians, meaning ordinary women do not frequently participate online. Yet, ordinary women are the most likely victims of sexual harassment, which ironically other prominent women are fighting against. Needless to say, likeminded women are finding solace in women-only, closed Facebook groups initiated specifically to address and discuss women's issues and grievances. Pahushamwari Hwedu Scholar, a group for women to assist each other with academic challenges which range from high school to thesis research and with a membership of 51.637 women, is a good example of such a group.



It is important for the government and other players to introduce tough laws that target online abusers of vulnerable groups with heavy penalties being imposed on lawbreakers. Also, there is need to introduce offline and online responsibility lessons on how to approach the social media sphere. There should be no taboos on how people ought to behave online and open discussions about this topic could educate others on their online responsibilities. It is important for such discussions to already begin in high school where most of the pupils are already exposed to social media. Funding permitting, free lessons should be offered, especially to men, on how to conduct themselves online as a way of fighting online bullying and harassment. Women groups should continue to establish online support groups to provide immediate assistance to victims of online abuse.



## 2.The empirical study

### 2.1 Introduction

Section 17 of Zimbabwean constitution reads: "Both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level." A closer look at local politics, which dominates just about everything in Zimbabwe, shows that women are still extremely marginalised when it comes to the distribution of positions of power. Only five out of 21 slots in President Emmerson Mnangagwa's cabinet are occupied by women after one of the female Ministers was axed in a high-profile corruption case in 2019. Also, the majority from the record number of 23 presidential candidates during the 2018 elections were men even though 54% of the country's registered voters are women (Mutsaka, 2018). Four women, Violet Mariyacha of United Democracy Movement, Melbah Dzapasi of 1980# Freedom Movement Zimbabwe, Thokozanu Khupe representing MDC-Tsvangirai and Joice Mujuru of People's Rainbow Coalition took part in the poll, recording what observers said was the highest number of women candidates in a Zimbabwean presidential election. However, women have historically played a leading role in the nation's wars against colonial interests. For example, towering figure Nehanda Nyasikana, a female ancestral spirit, is said to have led Zimbabwe's fight against colonialism, inspiring guerilla movements during the second Chimurenga war or Rhodesian BushWar between 1966–1979(Chogugudza, 2006).

Notable female politicians who nearly made history by winning political power include Grace Mugabe, the wife of the late president Robert, as well as liberation war hero Joyce Mujuru. Liberation war heroine Margaret Dongo has fearlessly fought Mugabe and ZANU-PF in postcolonial Zimbabwe, winning parliamentary elections in the capital Harare on several occasions, including the 1995 rerun in which she famously beat the ruling party's Vivian Mwashita. However, Zimbabwe has yet to achieve greater gender equality. In higher education, for example, none of the country's state universities is led by a woman. On the other hand, Women's University in Africa (WUA), a private University, has a female Vice Chancellor.



Despite the notable male dominance credited mostly to sociocultural and traditional beliefs regarding the role of women in the society, patriarchal attitudes and religious practices, women have begun to reclaim some power in several other sectors, such as the civil society and business. Still, only 18 percent of the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange listed companies have women directors (Nyahasha, 2018).

From Uganda's 2016 elections to recent political upheavals in other African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Internet shutdowns have become a common practice in Africa. For decades, some African governments controlled media in an attempt to suppress free speech, but in the digital age, Ogola (2018, n.p.) contends, "social media is becoming the frontier for state clampdown on free speech as governments exercise control over digital platforms". In 2018, Uganda became the first African country to pass a new tax law forcing citizens to pay (US0.05\$) per day to be able to access messaging and voice over-the-top services, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Protesters contended that the new law was an assault on freedom of expression, charges the government rejected. Legislation demanding a 930\$ blogging fee to publish content angered activists in neighboring Tanzania when it was introduced in April 2018. Other African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Cameroon and Ethiopia, in spite of government denials, have also blocked Internet access in the wake of anti-government protests.

Defined as an electronic form of communication that stimulates digital expression and gives a sense of community among users, social media has become a key medium through which we effectively communicate with each other. However, so far access to this increasingly significant tool is limited to a few. Across the world, social media has been credited with creating new frontiers for women's rights' digital organising. Several studies have shown how social media creates wide array of opportunities especially among the downtrodden. Research has shown how social media has helped women leaders promote their brands, advocate change, increase brand awareness and facilitate valuable interactions among likeminded groups. This report presents findings of a study that sought to evaluate the role of social media in promoting or impeding the work of women in Zimbabwe, where the most recent statistics show women trailing men in social media digital participation.

% of females	% of males	Total Addressable Ad Audience In Zimbabwe	Social Network
41%	59%	1 100 000	Facebook
41%	59%	510 000	LinkedIn
40%	60%	290 000	Instagram
22%	78%	193 500	Twitter
N/A	N/A	N/A	Snapchat

Figure 2: Social Media Use Higher Among Men than Women. Source: Tech Zim, 2019

## 2.2 Literature Review

One of the most commonly-used definitions of social media has been put forward by Boyd and Ellison (2008), who define it as “[...] web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” Kapoor et al. (2017)'s definition is centred on networking and interactions, while Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) zoom in on the creation and exchange of User Generated Content. More importantly, social media's critical function is in its ability to provide opportunities for us to express ourselves while interacting with others (Murthy, 2018).



Defined as applications that support group dynamics in terms of interaction, collaboration and social connection, (Barlett-Brag 2006), social networks have across the world been credited with aiding people, especially women, to challenge the status quo by demanding greater accountability and transparency mostly from those in positions of power and influence. A study by Kapoor et al. (2018) revealed that social media sites are giving women a chance to lead and shape society through a number of ways, including empowering themselves through access to truthful and accurate news updates of critical events and entertainment. Indeed, social media platforms have been identified as catalysts for online-driven women's empowerment by several scholars. Kumari and Sinha (2014) argue that, globally, women are turning to social media for political and social developments within their communities and beyond, while keeping abreast with information that inspires them.

O'Donnell and Sweetman (2018) suggest that digital platforms have made it possible have made on and offline conversations flourish focusing on important issues such as sexual harassment and toxic masculinities, allowing women to lead and amplify their voices. Thanks to social networks, which they argue have steered up campaigns challenging gender-based violence, it is now possible in some countries to oppose traditionally-held views about the role of women in a given society. These

social media campaigns have been used to advocate change in legal frameworks that effectively help reduce societal reliance on the norms and stereotypes supporting gender-based bias. Furthermore, they propound that the #hashtag movement, which uses social media as a springboard, has encouraged women to tap into a network of likeminded digital groupings to mobilise public support, lobby for and advocate policy reforms that seek to preserve and equally promote gender equality. They argue that: "Online communications can post breaking news and almost instantaneously create movements to challenge injustices and change the world, using pre-existing networks of friends and contacts, and creating new networks and coalitions to push forward on shared priorities (O'Donnell and Sweetman 2018, p. 224)".

Women's knowledge on media issues, access to and control over various forms of media is still limited in many countries, propose Premlata and Jukariya (2018). For this reason, they argue that the ubiquity of social media platforms and other online technologies should be used as avenues to promote and empower women participation in important institutions of society such as media and politics, adding that women's empowerment is very crucial for the development of any country. However, the digital divide cited by Chetty et. al (2018) exists in varying measures across the G201 group of countries, with less developed and poorer communities tending to be the most digitally excluded, thereby devastating women's potential participation online and reducing their chances for social transformation. In India, they argue, 23 % of girls become school dropouts before they reach puberty meaning some women do not even learn about the importance of ICTs at a very critical stage of their lives. Their data also show that 35 % of households in South Africa did not see the value of Internet access with signs of technophobia also registered in Nigeria. Yet, their prevailing roles, beliefs, and traditional norms make it difficult for some women in other societies, such as India, to fully participate online, suggests Johnson (2010).

On a positive note, a study by Thacker and Mathur (2018) showed that the advent of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter had galvanized women to voice their opinions and ideas. This is because social media platforms had made sharing of information almost instantaneous and easy. Their study also showed that social media participation made it possible for people to express support for a concerned cause virtually without the need of being there in person. Furthermore, their study concluded that symbolic actions, such as adopting a picture in support of a cause on Facebook, was a very useful way of creating awareness and showing concern towards a certain issue or event. However, they posited that such actions did not necessarily guarantee women's empowerment unless concrete measures were taken to increase their capacity towards leading fulfilling lives.



A report by Brandusescu and Nwakanma (2018) demonstrates the key benefits of open data, which has been shown in some societies to support complete public oversight of governments thereby potentially reducing corruption by enabling greater transparency. Their focus is Africa, where they argue research has shown that open data can boost economic growth through easier access to information, content and knowledge, critically allowing citizens to contribute to the development of innovative services, thereby empowering them, and contributing to government transparency. They maintain that open data has the capacity to deliver consequential benefits for women in Africa pointing to the TechMouso15 project in Ivory Coast, which convened and supported stakeholders working on gender and data to develop data-based solutions for local problems in diverse range of areas, including women's health, safety, education, and economic empowerment. Their study contends that the benefits delivered by digital technologies are not evenly distributed, with women and the poor less likely to have access to the Internet while their chances of use the web for political and economic empowerment are sligher.

To make matters worse, African countries are short of legislative, citizen rights, and gender-responsive frameworks that could deliver pro-women or gender-balanced policies. For example, once online, women in poor, urban communities are 30-50 % less likely than men to use the internet to increase their income or participate in public life further revealing that the digital gender gap is still largest in Africa. Brandusescu and Nwakanma (2018) further argue that one reason keeping women offline and contributing to the global gender digital divide is the exorbitant costs associated with access the Internet. Across Africa, based on their study of four countries, Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda, they suggest that the average price of a 1GB (prepaid, mobile) broadband plan is 18% of average monthly income – a cost that is extremely higher for women who statistics show earn less than men. Thus, their study reveals that women’s exclusion from the digital participation in Africa and other developing economies is principally a consequence of policy failure, which they argue can be and should be changed.



To better understand social media theoretically, especially its political inclinations, there is need to explore the public sphere theory, which traditionally has been understood as developing from the work of Jurgen Habermas, but is explicitly marked by several challenges especially when applied to digital spheres. For example, Fuchs (2014), drawing on Habermas, has suggested that the availability of social media, specifically Twitter, has provided a new arena for the public sphere of political communication, which carries, he argues, emancipatory connotations, claiming that social media allows people to openly participate in political and social deliberations online. However, from the perspective of African public spheres, it is not immediately obvious whether citizens living in repressive political environments would agree with Fuchs’ assertion.

However, any African theory of digital participation in the public sphere must take account of the politically constrained public spheres in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, before he was ousted in a military coup in Zimbabwe in November 2017, the late President Robert Mugabe had appointed Africa’s first “cyber security” minister to spy on citizens’ activities online. Public sphere researchers contend that when a government is unwilling to engage with civic society, media outlets and opposition parties, alternative voices in the public sphere take on the form of dissent (Moyo, 2018, Mutsvairo, 2016). As defined by Moyo (2011), dissent is a technique through which citizens protest and reject government policy. With the majority of African political leaders showing little interest in giving up power, the emergence of digital technologies has become a focal point for alternative models of political expressivity.

Gustafsson (2018) is positive in her assessment of feminist hashtag movements. Suggesting technology directly impacts women’s development, she theorises that hashtags have acted as critical support tools for the global digital feminist activism movements, given they use similar traditional activist tactics like letter-writing and petitions with women using hashtags to call out and reach out to powerful institutions, such as governments and corporates. Technology enables their voice to be heard and raising awareness on issues that affect them. Contributing to the same debate, Pruchniewska (2019) is adamant social media platforms have changed the dynamics of women participation in everyday politics, as digital technologies are making it easier to them to acquire knowledge about their rights.

Once they create women-only private Facebook Groups, women stand for each other, sharing career-related tips and support while creating opportunities for networking and career development, further establishing possibilities for individual empowerment and collective activism. The fundamental question, however, remains whether women are able or allowed to translate their online advocacy and participation into effective policy change. In the case of Africa, research has shown problems associated with transforming digital activism into real and sustainable offline changes (Mutsvairo, 2015 ;2016). How can we ensure the availability of digital safe trenches to allowvulnerable women in some parts of the world to participate freely? Another major drawback of internet participation for women, which to some extent affects men too, relates to consistent cyberbullying, which has been ignited by increased social media use across the world (Sakellariou, Carroll and Houghton, 2012) and defined by Jung et al. (2014) as the use of digital devices to frequently inflict harm on another person.

## 2.3 Findings and Analysis

While guaranteeing the anonymity of all respondents, we sought and were accorded consent to publish the names of four specific women leaders, whose experiences helped us highlight the challenges and opportunities associated with Zimbabwean women in light of the advent of social media. Interviews concluded that Twitter has become a hit for online abusers, who hide behind anonymous names while attacks on Facebook posted by men, who saw no harm in openly abusing women online were enjoying a steady increase. In spite of the increasing cases of online violence against women, "in addition to engaging in political participation, many women in Zimbabwe are highly active members of civil society. There are numerous women's civil society organizations dedicated to advocating for political change, fighting gender-based violence, providing women with resources, and fostering women's leadership skills," (Bardall, 2018, p. 16).



### 2.3.1 'Online Harassment'

While women leaders identified social media with cost-effectiveness given access was mostly free and affordable for those using paid advertising for their promotional activities, they also emphasized that for some social media participation came at a huge price. Participants, especially those working in advocacy singled out online harassment as one of their key challenges. Respondents said they either had personally experienced harassing or abusive behavior online or they knew someone who had fallen victim to sexist comments. Tackling online harassment would be difficult because most of the culprits used ghost accounts, they said.

“Yes, in a small way I have experienced online harassment. But not as harsh as I have seen others go through it. But yes, it is there. Especially on Tweeter, it's savage. If you say something that people don't like, they will be on your neck. You actually feel it's like they are really there ”  
(Respondent 1, December 14 2019)



Figure 3: Infographic Source: UNDP Zimbabwe

Some felt they were mostly targeted because of their gender adding that through their posts, some users would knowingly or unknowingly reinforce existing sexist attitudes against women. Online harassment has become an impediment for women to have their voices heard free from violence as social media participation has amplified existing gender-based discrimination and inequalities that have traditionally been restricted to offline spaces.

**“** *“ I think women are the easier targets for men. They can use sexist comments to derogate women and tell negative things about women. That’s the bad side of social media. Social media being an uncontrolled space where anyone can say whatever they want, it sort of like re-enforces the sexism, the patriarchal kind of beliefs and norms that people hold about women so sometimes it’s not really about what you post but it’s just about you posting as a woman and once that is identified as gender, somebody can just come to you and impose their own stereotypes and they start using language that is bad and naturally that brings in the stereotyping that exists against women, that is one way.”*

*(Respondent 1, December 14 2019)*



Stories of harassment kept coming with a number of respondents narrating the ordeal of posting information that others, especially men, were opposed to. Harassment occurred publicly but some abusers also had the audacity to follow you into your private inbox, one respondent said as she narrated her painful experience.

**“** *“ Some even come to your inbox but at the end of the day you have to ignore them otherwise they will stop you from doing what you want to do. We have been accused of training young girls to be prostitutes and some people don’t understand that we give support to children with no parents and most of them will have grown up in broken families or orphanages and they will already be exhibiting signs of deviance. We just ignore everything and focus on giving the girls the support that they need.”*

*(Respondent 16, 29 December 2019)*



Political messages were likely to attract more sexist abuses online, one respondent said. Her organisation promotes healthy male circumcision and campaigns against female genital mutilations. She said she is used to getting harassed and being called names with some accusing her organisation of using male organs for rituals. How do they deal with online abuse? She said they just ignored it choosing to focus on positive reactions they attract from other social media users. Not surprisingly she was one of the respondents who wanted social media to be regulated.

**“** *“ When someone puts up a political post in most cases they get harassed or their audiences react badly. I have relatives who have had to delete their accounts, use pseudo names or change their WhatsApp numbers after suffering from cyberbullying. If your post is anti-government or pro government either way you will get some negative reactions on social media and especially with the nature of my job several times we are asked why we want to circumcise men and if we know the feeling of being circumcised. Sometimes we are reminded of the mishaps that happen during circumcision or we are accused of using the foreskins of men for ritual purposes.”*

*(Respondent 14, 28 December 2019)*



Others pointed out that some women were resorting to self-censorship as a way of cushioning themselves from abuse. While such action was expected and understandable, it also meant that women would not fully participate in important discussions online, noted one respondent.

*“The issue of self-censorship and self-policing is something that I have noticed in some of the WhatsApp groups that I’m in where sometimes you say something expecting that other women will be a part of the conversation. Because they are now aware of the sort of harassment that they face, a lot of women do not want to have conversations on sensitive issues especially politics.”*

*(Respondent 5, 17 December 2019)*



There was a general consensus that the 2018 elections while general free of violence in comparison with previous campaigns, violence shifted to online realms.

*“We believe that the 2018 election violence was mainly fought online than offline and Cyber bullying became rampant in Zimbabwe and the victims were mostly women. Society used these platforms for revenge and as result many women’s reputation were damaged. As an organisation we have noted that the widespread inequality and discrimination against women remained embedded in society was being replicated on social media platforms and acts of violence and abuse against women online are an extension of these acts offline.”*

*(Respondent 18, March 3, 2020)*



### 2.3.2 ‘Jealous husband’

One respondent said social media had been very beneficial to her, because her husband did not appreciate late phone calls at home therefore social networking was enabling her to communicate and chat with her friends even late at night without making her husband jealous. To her having a private space to communicate with her loved ones was the big plus of being on social media with positives certainly outweighing negatives.

*“As married women at times like in my own experience I prefer talking to my friends on Facebook and sharing information like pictures on Instagram, I cannot give them my personal phone number because I have a very jealous husband who cannot tolerate me receiving calls at home all the time he would rather know that my friends have a limited space that they communicate with me. It’s some of those things that push us to be on social media even if it has its bad side. Social media gives you that private space away from the family and it gives you that friendship that you can never have physically.”*

*(Respondent 13, 28 December 2019)*



Social media could affect marriages in a negative way, especially if your social media friends do not know where to draw the line. One respondent said, as a Director of a company, she sometimes gets swamped with messages late at night, making it difficult for her to give attention to her family and causing unnecessary friction in her marriage.



*"At times some people become abusive online and at times they fail to give me freedom with my family, some of them send WhatsApp messages at night so it's not manageable especially if you are married and you want to give some attention to your family (the phone ringing a lot and if you do not respond to group messages they will start calling you or in boxing you even after working hours."*

*(Respondent 12 ,27 December 2019)*



The dominance of men in the Zimbabwean context knows no boundaries as it extends to social media, according to one respondent.



*"I post political messages all the time. I get varied responses from both men and women, especially on issues that have a direct impact on their lives and well-being. Men are more interactive on political issues, and women tend to respond more on issues about health, beauty and jokes. On intellectually engaging topics or articles that need more reading, insight and reflections, I sometimes get no responses at all from both women and men."*

*(Respondent 17, March 3, 2020)*



Hon Perseverance Zhou, a ZANU-PF (ruling party) member of parliament, said while social media had the capacity to change and shape societies, she cautioned that gender-biased reporting among journalists left women unfairly shamed by society.



*" Journalists sometimes take sides. When portraying a woman they scandalise everything but if a woman does something good they just mention the issue in passing. If there is a scandal, the woman's picture is wholly displayed and yet the man's role in that is overlooked mainly to shame the woman,"*

*she said.*



Figure 4: Hon Zhou Source: Twitter

She is active on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. The Midlands province-based politician said she uses social media to train people, because it reaches a wider audience in a short time. She is very positive about social media, especially WhatsApp, which she says is very efficient. She appreciates the ability to communicate with people living in her constituency thanks to WhatsApp.

For her part, opposition politician Linda Masarira said she has been a victim of digitally-based misogyny, sexism and systematic campaigns to tarnish her name and reputation after her decision to break away from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. In spite of targeted harassment, Masarira said she fights back by blocking her attackers from following her on social media. The outcome has been positive, she said.

*“ In the past two weeks I have seen a positive change on Twitter. This is because in the last month I decided to block 383 people who used to insult and abuse me, talk about my children and sex life, I block, I don't need that negative energy. I have now seen a decline in the attacks.”*



Figure 5: Source: Twitter

Masarira admits cyberbullying is a major problem in Zimbabwe. The 2018 elections, she continued, left several women regardless of political affiliation being tormented by trolls and online bullies. Surprisingly, most of her attackers were women.

*“ In my case, most of the cyber-bullying came from women, men were also cyber-bullying me but on a scale it was mostly women. Violence has many faces; cyber-bullying is a form of violence. In Zimbabwe when we talk about violence most people think of physical violence, blows and physical exchanges. Cyber bullying didn't happen a lot pre2018-, In my view 2018 elections were the most violent in terms cyberbullying to all women leaders regardless of which party you belonged to. This just shows how deep-rooted patriarchy is in Zimbabwe.”*



Figure 6:  
Linda Masarira Source : Bulawayo24

She thinks Zimbabwe is a broken society and insists taking a no-nonsense approach against gender discrimination is the best way forward.

“*Women constitute about %54 of the Zimbabwean population. We are not lesser people we deserve the same respect as men, we have a pivotal and critical role that we play in all spheres of governance, from the home to the workplace right up to politics*”



Figure 7: A Tweet of Masarira Source: Twitter

### Masarira criticises Obert Gutu for harassing women

Former spokesperson of Thokozani Khupe, Linda Masarira has criticised MDC-T Vice President Obert Gutu for derogatory statements towards women on twitter. Gutu yesterday told an entrepreneur and prominent political commentator Mirriam Mutizwa on twitter that she is ugly. Posting on her twitter handle Masarira said most of Zimbabwean male leaders want to compete and attack ... The post Masarira criticises Obert Gutu for harassing women appeared first on ZimOnline News.

[Read on the original site](#)

Masarira has not just suffered online harassment from her opponents, but she has also been a target of negative publicity in the local media. Headlines such as “Masarira in domestic abuse storm” or “Linda Masarira lied about being attacked” shows the toxic nature of the journalistic coverage of Masarira.

Figure 8: Article shows Masarira taking pro-active approach against alleged harassment of women

### Source : Zimbabwe News

- Priscillah Zvobgo Chief Marketing and Public Relations Ocer
- Industrial Development Bank of Zimbabwe (IDBZ)

For her part, Priscillah Zvobgo, Chief Marketing and Public Relations Officer at the Industrial Development Bank of Zimbabwe (IDBZ), reckons social media present an opportunity to cancel broader issues such as inequality.

“*What is happening on Social Media is nothing new, it is just a manifestation of what already has been happening in terms of inequality in the society. Social media is just another platform to channel the injustices already happening in the society.*”

She says she frequently uses Facebook, Twitter, Instagram along with LinkedIn, which she uses for work-related social engagements. She says that at the height of the coup or removal of Mugabe from power, she posted personal sentiments on what the end of Mugabe's leadership meant to her as an individual focusing on hope and an emerging, new beginning. She experienced an immediate backlash from people opposed to her views.

*“ However, I am used to the backlash, I am a trained Journalist and I was the first camerawoman working for ZBC, I find that social media is worse for women, there is this belief by men that they are the custodians of knowledge.”*

Zvobgo, in sentiments largely shared by several other respondents, said she believes online harassment against women will only become a thing of the past if “the main issue of patriarchy is addressed.” She also thinks perpetrators should be traced and prosecuted. Personal governance, she added, is equally important. “As women we have the power to manage this at home through the ways we raise our boys.” Any curriculum that perpetuates gender stereotypes should be dropped while workplaces should not be allowed to become hotbeds for gender stereotyping.

Glanis Changachirere, who is affiliated with the Institute for Young Women Development, said ‘anti-social media’ or perhaps spending less time on social media could help women being targeted by online harassers.

*“ For me I think there is no rule of thumb that one can follow given the historical stigmatisation, stereotyping and discrimination of women. Women need to maintain who they are because their experiences are theirs. They are the ones who own those experiences and those stories say what they want to say.”*



Figure 9: Glanis Changachirere

She however added that social media was an enabler when used wisely and effectively.

*“Women must feel free to say what they want to say but when they have said it, they do not have to conform themselves to the reactions on social media because sometimes when people respond its really to just provoke or put their own views about those certain people. So when you get obsessed around justifying and explaining yourself and wanting to respond, you run the risk of using social media to the advantage of your audiences and not of your own advantage.”*

### 2.3.3 'Communication made easy'

Among the 20 women leaders interviewed, there was a general consensus on the way social media platforms were empowering them. They acknowledged that social media was providing godsend opportunities for them while also admitting to the ills of using social networks. Social media platforms make communication easy, as users are able to pass information from one stage to the other without much hassle. Unlike traditional forms of communication, social media platforms smoothen communication by making it easy to reach larger audiences. Reaching larger audiences has the potential to impact the nature of your business, they said, since followers to your organization's social media platforms have direct connection to you, which means they can share their insights allowing you to adapt your social media strategy or the nature of your business to their needs. With social media, messages can easily be passed between different targets making interaction easy as participants share or retweet messages. Apart from being user friendly, these platforms also cater for an inclusive population including the illiterate or physically challenged, like the blind, through the use of voice messages. One participant singled out Facebook as a platform that enabled her to tell her story and that of her organization.

*So we go to Facebook to be able to tell the story. Facebook allows you to put in more characters, pictures, upload videos and you are able to actually tell the story. So because you want to appeal to people, you want to evoke their feelings, sympathy, empathy or whatever it is that you want people to feel, Facebook is about feeling. So that's the platform that we normally use.*

*(Respondent 3, December 14 2019)*

### 2.3.4 'Fake News'

Social media allowed women leaders to feel they are now part of the global village, where apart from being able to interact, access to user-generated content makes it possible for them to be able to keep up with the latest news updates in the country as well and globally. Information shared on social media can be truthful, but also un-truthful as users share or spread information popping up on their news feed without verifying whether the information is accurate. There, however, was a mixed reaction. Half of the women preferred some form of regulation, while the other half was opposed to regulation of the Internet, believing such drastic actions would constrain the democratic space.

*Social media has to be regulated because we have people who depend on social media for information so the spreading of fake news and all is very bad so someone has to take control. It might be hard because we don't own these platforms as a country, but I should think something can be worked out. It can be used a weapon to further people's interests like political, business and even human trafficking so there is need for it to be monitored and regulated.*

*(Respondent 16, 29 December 2019)*

Others were unsure if social media regulation is a positive thing. One respondent said she would only support regulation if it did not infringe upon the right of people to speak freely.

“ So we need to be careful on the regulation of social media in countries such as Zimbabwe. In a progressive democracy regulation is very good but in a regressive democracy like Zimbabwe, regulation can be taken advantage of by the authoritarian leaders. we need regulation but regulation that is progressive and that is according to international standards, that does not temper with the freedom of speech, there has to be a balance.

*(Respondent 7 ,14 December 2019)* ”

### 2.3.5 'Causes harm to other people'

Some studies have indeed proven that social media can have a detrimental effect on our mental health, self-esteem and well-being. Some interviewees felt they understood why this was the case.

“ People actually don't know to what extent they can go in interacting, what it does is social media liberates people in terms of their speech and in terms of their conduct. So a lot of the times you find that were it's really been a curse is where people tend to be exercising their 'liberties' causing harm to other people.

*(Respondent 3, December 14 2019)* ”

Another respondent felt social media was not good for the development of Zimbabwe because of the immorality that she said it promoted. She said because of the harmful information that is shared online, many people, especially the elderly, were abandoning social media spaces altogether. Cultural preservation was more important to her than technological innovations.

“ Social media is used to spread things that don't promote good morals and respect our culture as Zimbabweans and as women. So you find that a lot of people shy away from social media, I have a sister of mine, when I was circulating wedding invitations, she actually said, 'tell her that I don't go on WhatsApp'. At times you are sitting with your kids and one of them starts giggling there and when you probe and she opens the message, everyone will start walking out of the room. A lot of information that is being put on social media is not helping us, it's good to have social media but if it's used properly it would help on the development of this country.

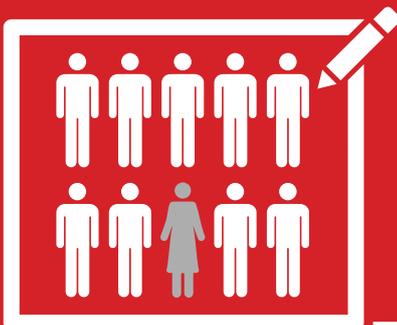
*(Respondent 10 ,15 December, 2019)* ”

## 2.4 Discussion

While they are quick to admit that social media platforms provide some meaningful threats to women's wellbeing (for example, as a result of constant online bullying), all participants said they believed social media has had a positive impact on many aspects of their lives. Participation on social media platforms did not impact on their self-esteem, neither did it leave them feeling insecure. Some admitted to being addicted to being online while others said being the most profuse users of social networking sites (SNS) had left them feeling more liberated and empowered. The technological digital divide, caused in part by deep-seated cultural barriers against women especially in rural areas, means not all women are able stay digitally-connected. Disparities in social media participation can be seen in Figure 1, which shows more men than women being active users in Zimbabwe. With more women being unemployed, paying for expensive data costs proved to be a huge challenge for many women.



Results from digital ethnography showed the use of English language in hashtags was very common. Conversations and spread of hashtags #OurBodiesNotWarZones, #SheSpeaksOut, #InjureOneInjureAll, which were all centred on protests against the alleged raping of women by the military were exclusively in English. The use of English language means some women, who may also be victims of sexual assault, are excluded from digital participation, which is indeed worrying. Excluding ordinary women from online participation means that anyone not conversant in English would not be in a position participate in such important discussions, leaving the social media space appearing like a meeting place preserved for educated elites. Some scholars have specifically called for the 'decolonisation' of the Internet, arguing, for instance, that only forty five per cent of all women in the world are online and "Internet Knowledge" is created by White men living in Western countries (Bouterse and Sengupta, 2018).



Yet, if we look at public knowledge online – as exemplified by Wikipedia, the fifth most-visited website in the world – it is written primarily by white men from Europe and North America. Only 20% of the world edits about 80% of Wikipedia's global content currently, and we estimate that 1 in 9-10 of Wikipedia editors self-identifies as female (Bouterse and Sengupta, 2018).

More than half of the interview participants said they post information about their personal and organisational plans or accomplishments on social media, while other said they posted updates about their family and friends. Some were quick to make a difference between personal and business accounts while only a few said they discussed political issues, hardly surprising in a politically-charged environment like Zimbabwe. Some women said the danger of being active on social media included exposing themselves to potential abuse, especially if their political correctness collided with the worldview of popular social media figures. One incident that was repeatedly raised by the respondents was when opposition leader Nelson Chamisa took the microphone from his wife while she was in the middle of making a point at a rally and remarking that speechmaking was not her role. Some women said they were forcefully targeted on social media for their apparent disquiet on what they viewed as "abuse of women" even though they purported to represent women's rights.

*We have been called Satanists, we've been called toothless bulldogs, we have been called mahure e ZANU PF (Ruling party ZANU PF's sex workers) and someone has said 'we should just go there and do justice to them, we need to abuse them so that they know what they are talking about, we need to correct and realign them'.*

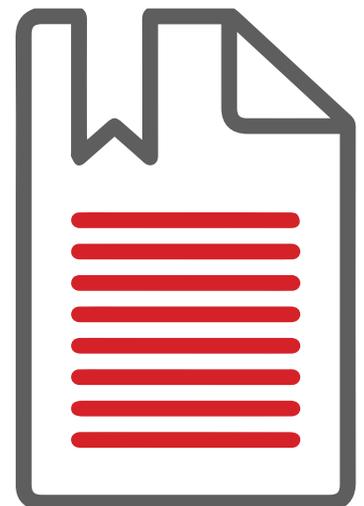
*(Respondent 3, December 14 2019)*

Women protesting against sexual assaults were able to use Twitter to reach likeminded people, who sympathized with their situation. Twitter is proving to be an online arsenal for advocacy because of its ability to reach a diverse global audience. News articles covering the march against sexual abuse were being shared through the #OurBodiesNotWarZones hashtag, allowing others to share and like messages and photos. However, those who could not communicate with brevity, it seemed, struggled to put their message across due to Twitter's -280character limit. A lot of dithering was also registered, as participants struggled to effectively communicate concisely. Better still, online advocacy would certainly become more effective if those targeted by your hashtag would also respond. The aforementioned hashtags targeting the military drew no reaction from the army. And not everyone was supportive of the campaign as other Twitter accounts visibly asked users to provide evidence of the rape allegations. However, it is also important to emphasise that other platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are frequented by several Zimbabwean women and they allow participants to respond to questions and related issued.

While social media platforms have given a voice for women to air their grievances, it still is quite evident that in Zimbabwe change is still unfortunately mostly driven by men, who have the political power and influence to impose it. Hashtags such as #OurBodiesNotWarZones raise awareness to critical issues affecting women but at the same time the army retains the power and it is difficult to see how alleged military offenders are disciplined when the army almost always refutes any allegations that put its members in negative spotlight. In that sense, social media remains a powerful tool in educating users, but a reform-minded political leadership will only institute change. Awareness is a good starting point, but on its own awareness is not good enough. Many women are aware of their circumstances, but sometimes the people who abuse them walk in the streets scot-free.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Digital spaces are making it possible for Zimbabwean women to easily interact with others who share similar interests. Social media has left them feeling accustomed to instantly connecting with others and sharing updates to their lives and businesses through status updates. Interviews with women leaders in Zimbabwe showed that they consider social media platforms as key tools for connecting and maintaining relationships, learning more about their communities and the world through news updates as well as providing opportunities to be involved in online activism. They agreed that social media encourages solidarity and offers an opportunity for shared experiences among women. However, in spite of all the positives, social media has attracted negativity, which is not unique to Zimbabwe but the world-over. Online abuse of women, for example, is very common. Some Zimbabwean women believe regulation is necessary while some think it could weaken and constrain the democratic space. Access to social media is also not for all. Data costs are very high in Zimbabwe, so a lot of women prioritise other things other than social media participation.





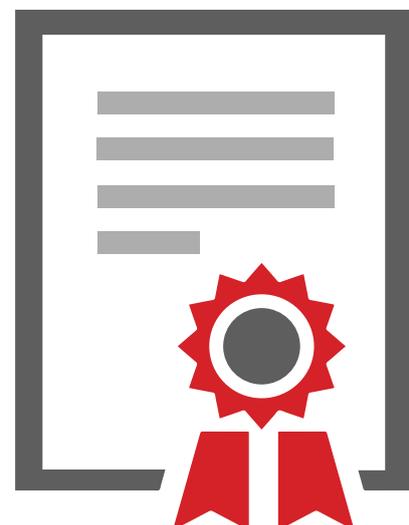
### 3. Recommendations

- With conversations on some social media platforms, such as Twitter, almost exclusively in English, it is important that digital dissemination in local languages be encouraged on all social media platforms so that non-English speakers can also participate digitally.
- It is important for the civic society and government partners to fund initiatives that benefit inclusive digital participation among vulnerable groups like rural-based women. Hashtag participants were mostly well-known figures in the Zimbabwean society such as journalists, activists, lawyers and politicians. Ordinary women were not fully represented.
- The government needs to introduce tough laws that target online abusers of vulnerable groups such as women and children. Heavy penalties should be imposed on lawbreakers.
- Society as a whole would benefit from responsibility lessons on how to approach the social media sphere. Free lessons should be offered, especially to men, on how one should conduct them selves online as a way of fighting online bullying and harassment.
- Women should establish online support groups to provide immediate assistance to victims of online abuse.
- High school curricula should include important topics, such as gender-based violence and online harassment, so as to educate the youth while they are still in school.
- The use of gender-inclusive language should be encouraged in all social media posts. Words such as “mankind” should be avoided.



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