

# Negotiating Precarious Online Spaces for Enhanced Gender Equality: Challenges and Opportunities for Zimbabwean Gender Advocacy

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**Abstract:** Social, economic and political challenges since the 2000s have especially propelled the need for civic action to challenge gender inequality issues. The emphasis of political reforms, for example, placing restrictions on public gatherings through the Public Order and Security Act, has created constraints for civic action around these matters. In recent years, while the formation of women movements has not been restricted, they have had to exercise an ability to adapt under what might be considered as unfavourable advocacy situations. Citizen movements which had generally almost disappeared from Zimbabwe's body politics after the 2013 general elections, appear to have reawakened through hashtag movements which use social media to break the restrictions on political mobilisation in the physical political space. The mobilisation and protests seen through social media symbolise a new frontier of activism and collective mobilisation. Where the hashtag movements have translated online mobilisation into street demonstrations, this reveals the potential influence of social media in politics. It is recognised that women generally play a peripheral role in citizen movements and part of the challenge is that the new movements forming via social media need to be interrogated to see if they are adequate spaces for women participation and gender equality dialogue. This paper seeks to unpack the challenges and opportunities of online gender advocacy through social media in Zimbabwe. Considering the recognised importance of broadening the representation of women in governance processes, the paper contributes to discussions on the influences of current online modes of civic action on gender equality.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Hashtag movements, New media activism, Social media, Women movements

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## 1. Introduction

The eminence of the internet in modern society raises a pertinent question on what role the internet and new media can play to reduce inequalities experienced by marginalised groups. New media channels are proving to be a powerful resource for multiple interests. Various groups use their persuasive power, for example, to create leverage on influential discussion platforms to penetrate politically and socially created boundaries. The different media platforms that exist open new potential for dialogue and for shaping change in society. Concerning gender activism, citizens and civil society organisations now have access to virtual spaces through social media unlike ever before. They can put forward issues previously concealed or restricted to a broader networked population. The nature of present day activism goes beyond traditional boundaries and seemingly creates optimism of "being heard" and participating in gendered social making processes.

In Zimbabwe, the power of social media to bring recognition and remedy on gender issues has not gone unnoticed amidst the numerous social, economic and political challenges that have riddled the country for over the last twenty. In recent years, a number of Zimbabwean gender activists have become active participants on social media. Civil society organisations concerned about gender issues and women's rights have also taken to social media to give thrust to gender inequality dialogue. The full impact that the alternatives social media creates for these activists and organisations alike are yet to be fully uncovered. A cursory look at the social media presence of certain organisations and activists through a simple Google search of Zimbabwean gender activists and women's rights organisations with Facebook or on Twitter reveals that it is notable. However, the information is not enough to conclude on what input or influence these online interactions and activities have on substantive political and social change.

The Zimbabwean socio-political context of gender inequality has historically been characterised as one which seemingly perpetually marginalises women and needs de- and re-constructing. Broadly, the context of gender relations has been influenced at individual, cultural and institutional levels such that gendered experiences exist at all levels of society and politics. Like any other society, Zimbabwean society faces socially created gender inequalities. For example, the cultural beliefs and behaviours that hinder women are embedded in social systems and are therefore structural. Even within a supposedly democratic political system with principles that ascribe equality as important, in building the envisioned democratic society, democratic processes are still highly gendered. In the present context of pervasive social media, it should be probed whether social media can challenge gendered structures to further gender equality.

This paper broadly presents the challenges and opportunities social media offers for enhanced gender equality in Zimbabwe. Gender equality in Zimbabwe still largely require the upliftment of women, thus an emphasis in the paper is on achieving equal opportunities for women. It begins with an overview of new media activism literature with an emphasis on social media. It then proceeds to discuss perspectives that explain gender inequalities constructions. This is then followed by an account of Zimbabwean social media activism. The concluding discussion proposes potential political and social influences of new media activism on gender equality agendas given experiences already observed.

## 2. New Media Activism

The use of new technologies by social movements to mobilise, protest or bring political change has long been a topic of research for scholars. The spread and use of these is contributing to changes in forms of activism witnessed across the globe. New media activism describes the incorporation of non-traditional forms of media in activism. The use of social media forms part of this. Social media has a longer history than some may realise but it is in the last decade that interest in its power has grown. For example, in 1979, Duke University scholars Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis created Usenet, a global discussion system that enabled users to post public messages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Increased internet access then led to the growth

of social networking sites for example MySpace (launched in 2003), Facebook (started in 2004) and Twitter (created 2006). It is only during the 2000s period that the term social media was coined and has grown in popularity to refer to these kinds of social networking platforms. Today, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram are recognised as the most influential platforms. Major global events such as the revolutionary waves during Arab Spring are used as examples to show just how powerful social media can be.

Numerous examples exist in the public domain of how social media is used for women's rights and to transmit information relating to protecting the interests of women. In some cases, activism has begun with individuals expressing personal views, then grown to a broader cyber discussion then a protest. For example, in 2013, three women, Jaclyn Friedman, Laura Bates and Soraya Chemaly, organised a social media campaign challenging Facebook to recognise gender-based hate in its content in reaction to Facebook removing and banning pictures of mothers actively breastfeeding. They turned public interest to the ways content on Facebook depicted violations of women's rights and contradictions in how Facebook depicts women. Within five days of their campaign, about 60 000 tweets mentioned the issue and 15 advertisers had left Facebook (Chemaly, 2014). During 2014, the same women continued to lead campaigns through social media to pressure Facebook "to remove restrictions on women's freedom of speech that results from "obscenity" double standards" (Chemaly, 2014). Further, there are Facebook pages such as "Hey Facebook! Breastfeeding is Not Obscene", which are dedicated to challenging the notion of banning pictures of women breastfeeding while publishing violent pictures. The presence of Facebook pages like these gives room to ongoing protest to the nuances of gender inequality on social media. The previously mentioned cases exemplify the strides active citizens can make to raise gender inequality issues on social media platforms and how in time, through the networked nature of social media, a cause can become an awareness raising protest. Civil society organisations that recognise the influence social media have even gone as far as assigning dedicated job positions, such as Social Media expert, to maximising social media exposure. The use of social media now features as a prominent part of activism strategies.

Broadly, the arguments on whether social activism can bring about social change have been nuanced. Lim (2013:636) argued that for social media activism to become populist political activism, it needed to "embrace the principles of the contemporary culture of consumption ... [and] ...is more likely to successfully mobilise mass support when its narratives are simple, associated with low risk actions and congruent with dominant meta-narratives". Lim (2013:636) further suggested that "success is likely when the narrative is contested by dominant competing narratives generated in mainstream media". What Lim (2013) did not do was place gender into this picture of social media activism.

Faris (2010) described the use of social media as "revolutions without revolutionaries". Faris (2010) further proposed that with social media networks it is difficult for regimes to cover up news stories or events. For a revolution to take place, it would not necessarily need revolutionaries. The social media would become revolutionary in itself. Miller (2017) proposed that digital politics reveals a rise in what can be termed "phatic communism" in social media. As a result, it has "atrophied the potential for digital communications technologies to help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere". However, Miller (2017) does not seem to adequately question the gendered conversational environment that exists. Win (2014:35) potentially raises that apart from the fact that new media offers a space for sexism and abuse, there is also "individualism, personal branding, and celebrity culture at the expense of the collectives of women", as well as the fact that "anybody can now speak on behalf of women, about women, rather than rights holders or the women affected by issues speaking for themselves". Therefore, scholars still trying to understand the revolutionary or non-revolutionary potential of online spaces, especially as it relates to gender inequality, need to probe the seemingly neutral, but covertly gender, inequality embedding analytical mechanisms. Writers are beginning to recognise the relevance of online spaces for feminist activism (Mills, 2014; Subramanian, 2015; Loiseau & Nowacka, 2015) and events in online spaces are driving the reconceptualising of notions such as structure, space, power and identity within gendered spaces. Yet, more is still to be achieved. Social relations and patterns of communications can no longer be understood without factoring in

virtual communities, networks and forums that exist and are at the disposal of those with access to the internet.

### **3. Constructions and Deconstructions of Gender Inequality**

Geiger (2006) suggested that online communities could be a way out of traditional social norms and mores. However, the socially constructed nature of gender means that the realities of standing against gendered traditions are wrought with difficulties. Theory on gendered behaviours and inequalities is diverse. The propositions on why these exist, why they are reproduced, and how to analyse their implications for society and social change have continued to evolve with time. Social theory identifies structures of gender inequality as constructed. It recognises the social structures and processes of social construction which embed gender inequalities in institutions and social interactions. Structural theories make assumptions that gender roles develop around the need to establish division of labour that maximises social efficiencies. Post-structural feminists largely emphasise the social construction of gendered identities and "the contingent and discursive nature of all identities" (Randall, 2010:116). Post-structuralist perspectives pertinently maintain that there is no universal identity of a "woman" or "man" category. Within arguments, identity politics critique underlies the work of many post-structural feminists. Gender categories forming the basis of political action are problematised as well.

Risman (2004:429) emphasised that gender needs to be conceptualised as a social structure "to better analyse the ways in which gender is embedded in the individual, interactional and institutional dimensions of our society". Risman (2004) proposed a conceptual scheme to probe some of the complexities of gender and isolate the social processes that create gender in each dimension. The rationale of the scheme is important considering a present need to reimagine how to change gendered social processes within a context of social media. Risman (2004) in no way captures all the complexities of gendered social structures but does attempt to highlight the kind of multidimensional analysis that could better be used to confront challenges around gender inequality. Risman (2004) argued that the social processes which hold dimensions of gender exist at individual, interactional (cultural) and institutional levels. Gender inequalities continue to exist

due to the nature of the social processes and interaction reproducing them.

The possible list of examples of social processes which hold gender dimensions is extensive. Table 1 is an adaptation of Risman's (2004) illustration tailored to social media related arguments that will later be presented. It exemplifies some complex social processes that reinforce gendered behaviours at three levels. At the individual level, socialisation reproduces gender schema on what it means to be a boy or girl, man or woman. Internalisation leads to a choosing of gender-typical behaviour by individuals. The construction of self, relates to the self-identity as an individual develops an image of how to view themselves and their gender. At the cultural level, status expectations formed by cultures exist and re-create themselves in different settings through interactions. Cultural beliefs about gender status and identity create characteristics that are favoured. These, in turn, "create a cognitive bias towards privileging those of already high status" (Risman, 2004:437), largely males. Privilege and status thereby become a gendered matter. Othering leads to unequal treatment between genders as views are held that one category is "normal" and is treated a certain way while the other category is not. At the institutional level, organisational practices, legal regulations and distribution of resources are gender specific not neutral. Institutional settings include the home and workplace. Organisational policies and laws may have gender neutral terminology but they are implemented in a gender stratified society, meaning gender equality is unachievable without deconstructing inequalities at the other levels that it exists.

Risman's (2004) approach elevates the analytic plane of gender inequalities. Multi-dimensional considerations such as this approach bode well for the multifarious implications of the virtual platforms of

social media. The opportunities and challenges that social media presents for gender equality can be understood at individual, cultural and institutional levels.

#### 4. Women's Voices in Zimbabwean Social Media Activism

Zimbabwe has had a fairly checked history of social activism around gender matters. Essof (2013:43) points out that by "the mid-1990s, it was clear that gender concerns were marginal within the mind-set of the Zimbabwean government". Zimbabwe's legal framework and Constitution then were outdated on matters of gender. Women's activism was largely state-sponsored from the 1980s until the 1990s then movements grew to become more autonomous and radical. As McFadden (2005:11) observed, "women realised that their citizenship status was contingent on a fundamental restructuring of the law and legal instruments that men were using to exclude them and/or to maintain the bifurcation of the law into traditional customary law and civil law". Factions in the women's movement did exist (Dorman, 2003). Win (2004b:23) observed that "it was patently clear by 1997 that the biggest problem underlying the Zimbabwean polity was the governance framework that is, the Constitution".

The idea that a new Constitution was pivotal to improving governance and democracy was fuelled by the abuse of executive and legislative power by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) government. In 1997, five young activists, including two women (Everjoice Win and Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga), founded the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which brought together most civil society organisations in Zimbabwe to advocate the drawing up of a new constitution. The NCA was a key driver of the constitutional reform process, together with the Women's

**Table 1: Dimensions of Gender Structure by illustrative Social Processes**

	Dimensions of gender structure		
	<i>Individual level</i>	<i>Interactional cultural expectations (Cultural level)</i>	<i>Institutional domain</i>
<i>Social processes</i>	Socialisation Internalisation Construction of self	Status expectation Cognitive bias Othering	Organisational practices Legal regulations Distribution of resources

Source: Adapted from Risman (2004:437)

Coalition (WC) that was formed in 1999 and had produced a women's rights charter. These egalitarian processes were unfortunately derailed and disrupted when the President appointed a seemingly partisan Constitutional Commission (CC) to write up a new constitution. In 1999, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was launched, signalling the opening of space for vibrant political opposition but further complicating the scene for women activism (van Eerdewijk & Mugadza, 2015).

The period of the 2000s heralded a different political setting for activism. While in the 1980s to the 1990s the right to demonstrate could be exercised without restraint, this was no longer the case in the 2000s. This can be linked to restrictive legislation enacted in this period. The 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, for example, gave the minister of information powers to decide on publications and licensing of journalists. The Public Order and Security Act of 2002 gave a lot of power to the police. The penalty of organising events without police permission would be conviction. The increasingly restrictive laws meant that women had to seek clearance to demonstrate for or against anything. The laws still exist at present and this weakens any spontaneity that might have been left in the women's movement after the 1990s (van Eerdewijk & Mugadza, 2015).

Civic movements have continued to be active in the face of restrictions. Organisations like the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), formed in 2003, have for example used bulk messaging services offered by mobile telecommunication networks to mobilise and notify their vast network of activists to attend various demonstrations against poor service delivery by government institutions. WOZA also has an active Facebook page which it regularly uses. The mobilisation strategies have been very successful and allowed WOZA to, in some instances, bring business to a halt in the major cities of Bulawayo and Harare. WOZA demonstrations have at times been seen as a nuisance by the ruling party and the organisation has been given labels such as a 'regime change institution' meaning that its leaders, operations and activities are often at risk of negative government reaction.

Other established women's organisations that remained visible through the 2000s include Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA), Women and Law in Southern Africa (WASN),

Musasa, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) and Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre, Network (ZWRCN) (Chigudu, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Chigudu, 2006; Chigudu, 2007). Their use of social media, linked to the increased access and use of mobile phones by citizens, is noteworthy. These and other women organisations have embraced the versatility of social media. Numerous examples exist. For instance, *Her Zimbabwe*, an internet platform founded in 2012 and managed by Fungai Machirori, works mainly through a network of writers based across the globe. It produces opinion pieces on issues affecting women and by hosting online campaigns. Issues on ending stigma against women who are survivors of violence, and sexual and reproductive health rights for young women have featured. In 2011, Fungai Machirori cited in van Eerdewijk and Mugadza (2015) wrote in one of her blogs:

*"I started blogging in 2009 after I realised that a Zimbabwean media outlet that would not censor my views on important societal issues around sexuality and sexual rights would remain a dream for a long time to come [...]. In the last two years, I have posted 83 articles and received over 870 comments and 60 000-plus hits. One of my most popular blog posts is one in which I questioned societal and personal perceptions of the vagina. Needless to say, I believe that I have created a community, a safe space where women – and men – can freely discuss issues. [...] In the absence of diversity and non-conformist mainstream media views, many young Zimbabwean women are turning to blogging to discuss the issues that affect them".*

Machirori recognised the power of social media for her own activism but also recognised the limitations of women activists on social media when she questioned "Does their discourse speak to the ordinary Zimbabwean woman, more than likely excluded from participation through lack of access to the Internet?" (cited in van Eerdewijk & Mugadza, 2015).

Another Zimbabwean blogger, Delta Milayo Ndou, who started her blog *'It's Delta'* in 2009, shared optimism that blogging has created a platform through which Zimbabwean women with access to ICTs can share the stories of those without. She stated:

*"If we were to wait until every woman had access to ICTs before recommending blogging as an empowerment tool, we'd be like idiots who do nothing*

*because they feel that what they could do is too little," she says. "And idiots we definitely aren't!"* (cited in van Eerdewijk & Mugadza, 2015).

A major issue still to be addressed is how activism using social media can bring out the stories of the often marginalised rural women or those without the advantage of technology to tell the story of Zimbabwean woman in its entirety. In 2014, members of the *Katswe Sisterhood* staged a highly controversial march to voice their concerns against attacks on women wearing shorter hemlines at minibus ranks. Their *Miniskirt March* created buzz on radio and social media (Nehanda Radio, 2014). The matter challenged gendered perceptions of dress and violence against women. As a result, a court ruling was made that people who harassed women wearing miniskirts would attract jail time. This victory emboldened gender activists to continue fight for their rights even more in Zimbabwe.

In the political sphere, social media has been used for gender focused forms of social activism. For example, the Southern African Parliamentary Support Trust (SAPST) created a Whatsapp platform in 2016 that brings together specialists (for example, economists and lawyers), experts on gender, policy and economic backgrounds and all female parliamentarians to discuss parliamentary legislation, gender focused policy issues and other pressing developmental issues in Zimbabwe. This platform helps female parliamentarians from both the ruling party ZANU PF and the opposition parties MDC-T (led by Morgan Tsvangirai) and MDC-N (led by Welshman Ncube) to come up with weekly motions to raise in Parliament based on evidence based research. The information shared via Whatsapp helps the parliamentarians who do not have access to researched information to learn more and also be able to present better guided motions before the House of Assembly and the Senate. This Whatsapp platform, named *Women's Voices*, has helped female parliamentarians in parliamentary debate and to hold the Executive to account more thus strengthened the oversight and legislative roles of female parliamentarians.

In 2014, a story on high costs and lack of access of sanitary pads to both rural and urban women (due to the high cost of the pads in a country of 90 % unemployment) went viral on social media. Due to high sanitary costs and lack of resources, Zimbabwean women were seen using pieces of

cloth, newspapers, fresh grass and even cow dung to absorb their monthly menstrual flow. This issue was also addressed in Parliament by opposition member of the National Assembly, Hon. Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga and the government responded by slashing tax on sanitary towels in 2017. On the whole, women's voices on important issues are evident in social media. What will be important to track is how far this activism goes to change gender inequality situations. Taking the dimensions proposed by Risman (2004), the prospective influences can be imagined (and would need to be supported) at the individual, cultural and institutional levels.

## **5. Prospective Influences of New Media Activism in Zimbabwean Gender Debates**

New media activism holds potential to change the elements of gender structures. This change can be at individual, cultural and institutional levels.

### **5.1 Raising Individual Agents of Change**

Duncombe (2010) argues that social media places the tools of documentation and truth-telling into the hands of ordinary citizens. He adds that social media networks create linked activists who can contest the narrative crafting and information controlling capabilities of authoritarian regimes. Storck (2011) observed that the implication for the role of social media is that it allows those who are directly involved to expose themselves to an international audience. Therefore, with social media, citizens become journalists themselves, telling stories, expressing their feelings, anger and even "chatting" the way forward. Information is often forwarded to news agencies, and the international community can be kept informed on developments through Internet channels.

In Zimbabwe, citizens use social media to, for example demand transparency and accountability from the executive in hope of influencing governance. The political spaces where women's opinion tends to be side-lined and sometimes ignored because of gender prejudices are challenged through social media (albeit contentiously). As more women activists embrace the use technology, more constructive women's voices can at least penetrate public spaces and be amplified. Notions of women's space and place can be

challenged. At present, individual female legislators are making use of alternative forms of media to promote citizen engagement in the law-making processes. For instance, Hon. Jessie Majome uses her Facebook handle to inform her constituency of parliamentary debates and she also gets massive responses to the issues she posts. These are available for her to use to frame her debates in the House of Assembly. Opinion leader Fadzayi Mahere (who has already declared her intention to contest as an Independent candidate in the 2018 Zimbabwean elections as a Member of the House of Assembly) regularly airs her opinions and puts pressure on the government to act on various issues making use of social media to promote citizen engagement. Mahere has managed to come up with an online manifesto which she has shared on her Facebook page and has urged other young people to be actively involved in national politics. Interestingly, her campaigns have been low cost as they are online based and she has even gone on to urge people who might want to read her manifesto to request for it in the three major Zimbabwean languages of English, Ndebele and Shona.

Thokozane Khupe (Opposition MDC T Vice President and Member of the National Assembly) led *#BeatThePot* campaign, just by following the hashtag. This campaign later escalated onto the streets of Bulawayo as open demonstrations against the government's poor service delivery record, corruption and mismanagement of the economy which the demonstrators claimed had reduced women to vendors who have to survive by sheer bravery as they have constant run ins with law enforcement agencies when they sell their wares in undesignated areas. Individual leaders being agents that translate online campaigns into tangible mass mobilisation for physical demonstrations has proven to be a possibility in Zimbabwean urban areas but little or no traction has been made to penetrate the 'closed' rural parts of the country which have the majority of the country's population. Such initiatives by women leaders could be a better way women engagement in future Zimbabwean politics. It however stands to be seen whether such social media influenced political campaigns are sustainable in Zimbabwe whose bulk of voters (about 67%) are in the rural areas (where the ruling ZANU PF party uses mass mobilisation face to face campaigns and rallies to explain its policies and manifesto to the majority of the electorate) and have limited access to the internet and various technologies or they will become

elitist campaign tools reserved for urban and generally young voters.

Many young Zimbabwean women are on social media for personal and activist reasons (Chirenje, 2011; Changachirere, 2011). Hashtag campaigns on Twitter are especially proving to draw an interest from young women that need to be involved in shaping the political arena with respect to gender equality. Issues on Zimbabwean women identities, challenges of how women images are constructed have featured through hashtags. The online expressions could point to individuals more conscious of gendered socialisation, internalisation and even construction of self. Although such an assertion is yet to be empirically found, discursive constructions of gender do appear to be challenged by women on social media platforms in their personal and even professional capacities. The platforms widely disseminate information and views on gender equality. However, the obstacles remain in translating women's online advocacy from individual action (for example, through a tweet or post) to pushing for systemic change through policy. Their impact in the political arena needs to be translated to power on the ground. Women can tell their various stories and make their voices bolder. The next step might be that they work towards gaining nominations for political party primary elections, campaigning for the leadership positions and being elected while also occupying great influence on social media. A reason for this would be to maintain a balance of both virtual and physical influence given that these two require different effort and can play different roles in deconstructing gender barriers. Achieving gender parity in the political spheres will likely needs more unconventional modes in the future and enhancing present skills to use the tools could bode well for women in politics in the future.

## **5.2 Understanding Impervious Cultural Barriers**

Geertz (1973) described culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" through which people "communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life". Gender is an issue of culture not nature and therefore tackling gender inequalities requires a contestation of culture. Sardenberg (2012) investigated the relevance of culture to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment and how Latin American women movements have

negotiated and contested gendered meanings around culture. Sardenberg (2012) concluded that “transformatory thinking” has been the key to confronting cultural meanings and such can re-structure gender order and enhance gender equality.

Dobson (2015) highlights the complexities, tensions, and shifting flows of power in media as well as in gendered subjectivity production in postfeminist digital cultures. She points to contentious gendered media practices and representations. In doing so, Dobson (2015:2) suggests that these media practices and representations can be seen as cultural modes of “survival” and “getting by” and are “political significant in terms of what they reveal about negotiating conditions of postfeminism and femininity in contemporary techno-social mediascapes”.

As Risman (2004:436) argued, cultural expectations have “remained relatively impervious to the feminist forces that have problematised sexist socialisation practices and legal discrimination”. This includes social media culture. Online spaces can silence activists and open them up to threats of violence, rape and even death (Subramanian, 2015). They can be spaces for perpetuating violence against women even if violent acts do not immediately follow. Purohit, Banerjee, Hampton, Shalin, Bhandutia and Sheth (2015), using big data, found substantial gender based violence related content on social media. Amongst their findings were that spikes in gender based violence reflected the influence of events especially involving celebrities and that social media content highlights the role government, law enforcement and business have in the tolerance of gender based violence (Purohit *et al.*, 2015). The findings point to a need for more research that analyses social media content to extract not only measure attitudes but to develop possible interventions. Big data research on women participating over women issues in Zimbabwe could reveal much about what cultural expectations exist and are being shaped by social media interaction.

Negative online behaviours and attitudes against women are recognised by many. Aumiller (2011) observed that Twitter often promotes violence against women. Despite online protests that have developed against these, much is still needed to understand truly what social media culture on gender inequality for Zimbabwe is and how it can be shaped to deconstruct gender inequalities at the different levels that it exists.

### 5.3 Challenging Enduring Institutional Barriers

Police violence, harassment and beatings of gender activists still takes place as restrictive legislation largely facilitates this. The already small space women movements occupy in civil society operates under major restraints. For major players that have developed sound strategies to operate within the limits of existing legislative frameworks, their experience has continued to carry them forward with their cause. However, new players will find it difficult to carry forward any visible mobilisation campaign for fear of being labelled enemies of the state. This reality and lack of resources constrain support for emerging activism. The institutionalised forms of resistance to gender deconstruction are arguably expressed through the responses of censorship and harassment when gender questions are raised. Female-written blogs and websites have been subject to much censorship. For example, Magodonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams from the WOZA have been arrested numerous times. Through Facebook, WOZA has made known their experiences. Essentially, when practices, laws and resources are examined, these are largely used to maintain gender inequalities. Using social media to deconstruct these aspects would require commitment to institutionalising gender balancing processes in various institutions.

External organisations have been useful at extending gender activities where local funds have been constrained. For example, Hivos Southern Africa is supporting improvements of women in Zimbabwean politics. It is currently implementing the Women Empowered for Leadership programme which aims to enhance opportunities and capacities for women to participate in political and societal decision-making processes. It is anticipated that women with enhanced capacities to engage in influential institutions in their different capacities can change institutional gender dynamics. Hivos hosts a blog to share information on activities that have taken place in the country. Linked to these activities, information is transmitted via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. As more women raise to hold influential decision-making positions and gain capacities needed to redress gender related marginalisation and social exclusion, the institutional domain producing gendered practices, laws and resource distribution could be altered.

## 6. Conclusion

Social media has introduced speed, interactivity and flair that has been lacking in the traditional mobilisation techniques. Zimbabwean women movements and activists continue to adjust to their changing socio-political environment and the same can be said when it comes to online environments. Activism through social media can have great potential but many lessons are still to be learnt about what is truly needed to deconstruct the gendered Zimbabwean social, economic, political and cultural context using social media. A number of limitations, for example, e-literacy and digital divides, still exist to more inclusive dialogue on women issues. Should online advocacy continue to grow, the needs of the still silenced proportion of rural and indigenous women will especially need to be captured as further neglect of their voices risks online gender advocacy developing splintering features far worse than those experienced between genders.

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