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Hashtag activism: popularizing feminist analysis of violence against women in the Horn, East and Southern Africa

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Social media is ushering in a new era of mobilizing for social change; it is a promising tool for spreading feminist discourse. Examples abound. Earlier this year, the Women's March, initially planned for Washington DC to protest against growing conservatism, sparked activism around the world. A global wave of awareness and action on violence against women (VAW) is emerging from campaigns such as #EverydaySexism, #UrgentAction4Women, and #EndFGM (female genital mutilation), opening new opportunities for feminist movement building.

As a case study for how social media is changing feminist activism, we share the journey of the Gender-based Violence (GBV) Prevention Network in the Horn, East and Southern Africa (HESA). The authors are activists working with Raising Voices, a non-profit organization in Kampala, Uganda that coordinates the GBV Prevention Network. The Network encourages a feminist analysis on violence against women in Africa through community mobilization and advocacy.

Created in 2003, the GBV Prevention Network began as a small, dedicated cohort of 25 women's organizations who shared a feminist perspective and commitment to addressing VAW. More than a decade later, with a membership of over 1,000 individuals and groups from international organizations, UN agencies, research institutes, faith-based organizations and general civil society groups across 21 countries, the feminist foundations of the Network feel even more necessary, yet also more distant. VAW prevention and response programming that does not include a feminist analysis can fail to address power imbalances as the root cause of violence, leading to ineffective and sometimes dangerous programming (Mary Ellsberg et al. 2015; Emma Fulu et al. 2013; Lori Michau et al. 2015).

The challenge before us is to re-center women and a feminist analysis within VAW prevention and response in HESA among our members. Complicating factors include a context where feminist organizing is significantly underfunded; a shrinking civil society space; and the predominance of international non governmental organisations (NGOs). All of these factors have reduced politicized social justice programming. Our response is to use low-cost, accessible social media platforms to regularly reach a critical mass of activists and programmers with a feminist analysis of VAW.

As a result, over the past few years, the Network has experimented with social media campaigns such as #VAWFree, #Power101, #lifewithoutpatriarchy and #16days to popularize

a feminist analysis of VAW using Twitter chats, “tweetathons,” blogs and special graphics. To us, “popularizing feminism” means sharing a compelling, accessible feminist analysis of violence against women on diverse platforms in creative ways to facilitate widespread interest, uptake and action for social norm change. For example, the GBV Prevention Network’s week-long social media campaign #lifewithoutpatriarchy reached over 190,000 people, and the Let’s Talk about Power campaign united over 70,000 voices on the #Power101 hashtag. These and other campaigns are designed to provide insight into how patriarchy manifests in the region and to ignite conversations about feminist activism to change the status quo. The campaigns use graphic art and highlight prominent African feminists to build community and weave together feminist ideas and voices in order to inspire reflection and action for a #VAWFree world. The Network’s offline activities strive to use and extend online content into in-person processes, events and activism, thereby reinforcing and further strengthening and deepening feminist analysis and action.

While it is still a work in progress, the Network is learning the opportunities and challenges of using social media for feminist consciousness-raising and action.

Opportunities include:

- *Claiming feminist ideas as African and not a foreign import.* The campaigns are providing space for African women to explain and engage others on feminism in their own words, allowing the ideas to be articulated and contextualized within African women’s experience rather than as a reaction or adjunct to Western feminisms. This is particularly important, as face-to-face processes in the region and writing by African feminist academics only reach a small number of people. Further, increasing the visibility of African feminists is powerful. The self-identified feminists involved in the campaigns are compelling and articulate, and their visibility provides role modeling for other women and men.
- *Building solidarity.* Social change movements grow from communities of like-minded individuals and groups. The Network’s campaigns are fostering a sense of belonging to a regional feminist sisterhood that often does not exist at the national or regional level. Connections with the African feminists highlighted in or actively following the campaigns (e.g., through new followers, friendships, co-organizing, etc.) and opportunities for more virtual and offline exchange beyond the campaigns is creating a community of aligned individuals and groups who otherwise would not have been in touch with each other.
- *Repeated exposure to ideas.* Social media is enabling activists to have access to new ideas, current thinking, and new resources and perspectives that are not well known or easily available. Now, feminist ideas are readily accessible on smartphones and organizations can maintain intensive exposure to ideas curated from various sources.
- *Strengthening offline organizing.* Since beginning the campaigns, other networks, such as the Association for Women’s Rights in Development, The African Women’s Development and Communication Network, African Women’s Development Fund, Urgent Action Fund Africa, activists and organizations have collaborated in the campaigns with us. Social media provides a space to know the perspectives of other groups and to support each other through tweeting, retweeting, and sharing of events, opportunities, resources and activism.

While there are many opportunities, limitations of social media as a frontier for feminist activism in HESA must also be identified and overcome.

Challenges include:

- *Internet access and online safety.* While social media can be a powerful tool for social justice organizing, Internet accessibility in sub-Saharan Africa remains limited, with most of it focused in the urban areas and within groups of higher socioeconomic status (GSM Association 2016). This is compounded by a lack of safety in online activism and by governments shrinking space for social justice work. The arrests of activists such as Uganda's Stella Nyanzi (Maria Burnett 2017) are painful examples of how social media activism does not offer the protection of an in-person community or local network for support.
- *Oversimplifying feminism.* Social media favors content that is light and populist, with flash appeal. Breaking down feminist concepts and explaining complex ideas in Twitter's 140 characters can mean oversimplification, making critical ideas pithy or shallow. In addition, with a barrage of messages and ideas, the transient nature of social media requires constant creativity to capture and maintain the attention of followers.
- *Competing priorities.* In HESA, a region fraught with conflict and poor governance, topics on democracy and politics trend at a staggering pace. Competing with breaking news and topical political discourse is challenging. Feminist narratives that challenge the status quo and question male privilege seem less urgent or topical. Therefore, considerable time is needed to keep up with trending topics in order to use them as hooks and unpack them with a feminist analysis and put them in a VAW frame.
- *Lack of attribution and accountability.* Attribution for declared shifts and norm change inspired by social media is problematic in multiple ways. First, measuring attitude and behavior shifts among Network members is difficult to do with accuracy. Second, it is impossible to attribute change to a single platform. Donor demands often include specific attributable impact from an organization's efforts, which may not be possible within a social media context.

Moving forward, while these challenges exist, social media is a promising tool for popularizing feminism, feminist organizing and movement-building. In our experience, social media has great potential in bringing feminist ideas to ever-widening circles, leading to new socialization processes around gender hierarchies and power in intimate partner relationships. Overall, social media's contribution to accessibility of the feminist discourse beyond academic or traditional activist spaces holds new potential for widespread social norm change, increased activism and, ultimately, safer lives for women in the HESA region.

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