



MOVING THE CENTRE WITHOUT CONFLICT; GENDER AND VIRTUAL EMPOWERMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE VIRTUAL EMPOWERMENT MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There is a wide gap between women's access to education and women's empowerment in a patriarchal society. In addressing marginalization, women in Southern Africa have made significant achievements and have excelled in a variety of fields, including the male domain. This has been possible due to emergent technologies which present new opportunities for women by empowering them in obtaining higher education, playing an active process of construction of knowledge, attitudes and values as well as developing skills using a variety of resources such as printed material and electronic media. This article investigates how four African housewives successfully moved the centre without conflict in their families especially with their husbands by getting educated using web-based technologies across face-to-face, online, and virtual world classes with communication tools that are synchronous, asynchronous, and automated pre-scripted. The study is qualitative and captures the narratives of the women using the ODL mode in successfully changing their circumstances while attending to their roles as mothers and wives in their kitchens. The integration of E-learning, which is the application of information and communication technologies in a wide array of solutions, improves knowledge and performance. The results were IT supported learning helped some of the women to acquire the necessary skills knowledge for their job without taking time off their traditional roles and duties in household work for example, cooking skills.

KEYWORDS: Women, Empowerment, Education, Knowledge, Teaching, Resource

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is the process of obtaining basic opportunities for marginalized people through the help of non-marginalized others by actively removing those barriers to access opportunities. In developing countries women to a large extent are

often marginalized since culturally their place is supposed to be in the home. Their chances of getting higher education are very limited. The advent of virtual education opened doors to enable individuals to advance themselves educationally at any place and any time (Col, 2005; Rowntree, 1994). Such a platform

enables individuals to study from the comfort of their homes. Thus, the woman can study while engaged in the cultural expected roles such as household chores. The existence of virtual regions has enabled to move centers of education from residential institutions to roving institutions. Distance is no more a barrier to education. Education is being brought to people's doorsteps. Individuals are being empowered in the comfort of their homes using the distance education mode. Needless to say the virtual education platform encourages students to develop skills for self-sufficiency. Individuals have to find educational means to face real world problems for self-sustenance. In this instance constructivist teaching has a role to play since it strives to apply to real world problems relevant in people's daily lives. Students use of the interpretation of their experience helps in knowledge formulation that is indeed relevant.

BACKGROUND

Learning is associated with personal change and empowerment. In literature and development measures we read of how girls compared to boys have difficulties in accessing education and this has the downstream results of disadvantaging them on the job market. This wide gap between women's access to education and women's empowerment in a patriarchal society has been on the agenda of development policies including gender policy in Zimbabwe.

Linkages have been made between household structures and social relations and those of the broader society, (Schmidt, 1996, pp2). In other words the problems of women's unequal access to power and resources, causing women's oppression is deemed to start in the household. Studies by Boserup (1970), Sen & Grown, (1985) have demonstrated that if there is an opportunity for self improvement, the woman will be the last to be considered. Resource allocation in the household is not equal. On the other hand, women felt that if only they could get educated then they would be economically independent and would break out of this vicious circle where they continue to be dependent on men. This research is focusing on how four women using ICT's felt that they were able to empower themselves and to a limited extent defeat female oppression within the work place and their households. Adult learning using distance mode of learning is seen as the avenue of empowerment for women. This has been enhanced by new technologies, which have made it possible for women to communicate and access education in their homes, hence moved the centre without neglecting their roles of motherhood or home carer.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

What is the role of virtual education in empowering women without upsetting their family set ups?

Sub –Problems:-

How does virtual education empower women?

What are the major challenges and opportunities women face as they educationally empower themselves to venture into the male dominated fields by acquiring Higher Education?

How do the women overcome these challenges?

The situation as a developing country:-

Changes have been made in the political field where women participated in the freedom struggles but participation has not translated into equal representation after elections are over (Kiamba, 2008).

Rai (2011) also challenged the growth agenda when she outlined how emphasis has shifted from the need to address food production to sustainable development in the development agenda where women were being burdened by their role as typically homemakers and the man, as bread winner and head of household (Sadie, 2005). The man had to learn new ways of farming as an example. This is because he was the one bringing in the cash crops and women producing food crops for the household. However the World Survey on the Role of Women in Development (1983) noted that starvation and hunger had remained constant despite advances in science and technology and new ways of farming by men. It attributed this to the way potential roles of women in agriculture had not been taken into consideration. In particular women's work overload and no labour saving technology being introduced to alleviate the overload. Women's involvement in agriculture as independent farmers, livestock-keepers was also overlooked.

Schmidt(1996:98-121) outlines how even the colonial regime exploited women in this country in order to get the labour of the local males by enacting laws such as :Native Marriage Ordinances of 1912, Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinances of 1916 and pass laws for females seeking domestic employment in urban settings. All this done to keep the African woman in the rural areas where they would continue to subsidize male wages through subsistence production and continue the reproductive role so that labour would continue to be available.

Various other factors limited women who had to face constraints of the patriarchal system where decision making powers were in the hands of males. In the African context, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role and status of women in society are still prevalent and some women,

who are part of this system, find it difficult to dislocate from this culture and tradition lest they be ostracized.

With colonialism quite a number of African women found refuge in mission stations and had access to education then. According to Essof (2013), missionary education was underpinned by Victorian European culture and ideas. She describes it as dedicated to 'domestication' of African women. This is because the education concentrated on home crafts and domestic science. Church organization such as Ruwadzano (United Methodist Church) in established in 1919. It encouraged this type of women's education with the aim of making the women better wives. This religious outlook is still prevalent in our Churches.

The work of Schmidt (1992) showed colonialism being consolidated and European political institutions and practices being extended to black people at the expense of indigenous socio-political and economic systems. Essof (2013) concurs that women under indigenous systems were afforded status and influence and yet with the coming of missionaries this was slowly being eroded and becoming dysfunctional. She goes on to add that the Shona were subjected to a 'revamped version of 'customary law 'whose patriarchal aspects of indigenous culture had a high blend of Victorian notions of womanhood as dictated by missionaries. This did not apply to Shona people only but to African women as a whole. Black men became accustomed to the notion that women were legal minors under the custodianship of her father, husband or eldest son. The situation was challenged by female combatants and a few, who were university-educated and professionals soon after independence (Gaidzanwa, 1992). Critics to challenge gender subordination had begun and this appeared to have been supported by government to a certain extent. A whole new ministry was established (Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs) in 1981 to advance the interest of women among a plethora of gender-sensitive legislative changes. However what had been planted by missionaries and practiced all these years could not be eradicated and discrimination against women continued. Women activists were labeled 'feminists' and after Beijing conference, anyone who would advance Human rights issues was seen in the same light.

Policies that targeted women only were not receiving the best results in changing the circumstances of women. New thinking was along the lines that change should not only be the way women work, live and care for other members of the household, but also in men's roles in the family and community. From women in Development (WID) to

Gender and Development (GAD) and the issues were that men and women are different but it is important to have their views equally heard and recognized in society, in economic and political planning as well as decision making. Internationally, women's organizations and networks that promote women's cooperation and participation in politics increased at global level in an effort to change the position of women in society. The Beijing conference and UN's Women Watch (www.un.org/womenwatch) website made global information gathering and dissemination more efficient. This was an unparalleled opportunity that affected women's access to communicate and share information, and reached many people which helped to influence knowledge and understanding of the world and most importantly as a source of power for African women. By using Information and communication technologies like the internet women had found a tool that they could use to share knowledge, express their concerns and use to lobby on gender issues and social justice.

Lack of education and training has been blamed for making women to accept their secondary status as the natural order of things (Duverger, 1975 as cited in Nzomo, 1997). There are other barriers (implicit and explicit) that make it difficult to attain equity even after policy and legal frameworks have been put in place. Open and Distance learning is opening many doors although it had been hoped that in higher education things would change faster as universities are viewed as centers of free thought, change and human development. Leadership in higher education is still a man's world and universities are male dominated institutions (Gumbi, 2006).

Amidst these events four women (who are my informants) chose to change their situation quietly using new technologies while carrying out their roles in the home. Today they are leading government departments and industries. This research is to find out how they managed it given the cultural biases and barriers that women were subjected to.

Role of internet in virtual education:-

The internet provided alternative ways for individuals from all over the world to directly communicate their views, experiences and suggestions. This innovative use of the internet was considered successful and an exciting experiment in global democracy by women at UN level, Rai (2011). The centre was being moved without conflict by mobilizing and connecting with women all over the world with one common purpose i.e. having the voices of women heard and moving towards reclaiming the power and dignity that African woman had before

colonization. This is at a time when social ills such as HIV&AIDS pandemic is blamed on the women and yet they are the ones carrying the most burden in caring for the sick and orphans left behind.

The internet began to be used to distribute alternative, balanced and equitable portrayals of women. It was now being used to exchange views, experiences and news with other gender activists in a world-wide public forum. The internet helped facilitate the analysis of women's situations and the development of strategies to address them. Women were able to find allies across communities, nations and regions. This meant that women in the Sub-Saharan Africa would be aware of what their counterparts in West Africa would be planning within minutes. Networking and global petitioning and access to up-to-date information from around the world helped women to share and promote work of their organizations as well as publish material quickly and cheaply. For example, a women's resource centre in Harare would make information from the internet available in their documentation centre and to beneficiaries of their rural libraries programme. Frissen (2000) study noted access to and use of the internet by women was on the rise and this was not just in the North but the South as well. The narratives of four women who took up studies and courses using ODL to improve their wellbeing at a time when the country was going through economic upheaval will demonstrate that instead of resisting their burden of work by agitating and running away to start new lives in towns, farms and mines as their counterparts had done during the 1920s and 1930s(Schmidt,1996:97).New avenues of escape were opening. Patriarchal control could be evaded in new and more permanent ways.

Justification of the study:-

The research is aimed to finding out how women can change their situations by getting an education against all odds. There is consensus among different stakeholders that education sector was the one area where girls were not given access. Families would support a boy child through their education and withdraw a girl child from school if resources were not adequate. In households parents were being asked to pay more for extra lessons for their children and to supplement teacher's salaries and therefore there was not enough money to support the education of women. This is summed up by the UN Secretary General's remarks at the 58th session conference of the Commission of the Status of Women AWID (2014) in which he admitted that inequality remains.

"We've come along way, but there is much to do and little time to do it." While there has been progress, deep inequality still remains;

women still earn less than men, there is still a need for more women in decision-making positions. He raised particular concern about that state of sanitation, highlighting that more than 2.5 billion people lack the benefits of proper sanitation, which affects women and girls in particular ways. He made a call for quality sexual reproductive health and services and for ensuring women's reproductive rights. While maternal health is improving and child mortality is dropping significantly, too many women and girls continue to die every day because of pregnancy related causes; almost all of them are from developing countries, who die from preventable causes. He made the crucial link between VAW and HIV and AIDS, highlighting that more young women are infected with HIV than men; that too few young women have knowledge about HIV or are able to negotiate condom use. With less than two years remaining on the MDG deadline, he emphasised the importance of championing the rights of women in the post 2015 development agenda saying that "We cannot achieve dignity for all without gender equality. I count on you to champion the human rights of women and girls. We need to end gender inequality in all forms."

This is a clear indication that as we approach 2015 the MDGs may not be achieved and something has to be done. The debate may continue but practical ways and best practices should be adapted.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study attempts to document how in spite of challenges faced by the women in accessing higher education, four women managed and succeeded in improving their education and are successfully leading institutions where women have not been considered before. This paper will mostly try to document their experiences in supporting their husband's careers and getting their children through school and at the same time improve their own position. The objective is to show that hard work and multiple roles is nothing new to women. Quietly women can achieve their goals of equality if they continue to persevere.

METHOD

This was a qualitative study which was concerned with understanding how the women viewed what it meant to have an education and a career and not be satisfied with the level they had reached. We wanted to understand how they constructed their social reality in everyday interaction given their position as mothers, wives and individuals.

In developing feminist research we believe that we need to engage in critical reflection that surfaces the challenges of this kind of research in Africa. Feminist have argued that it is necessary to make the researcher visible in order to understand the epistemological process of how and why knowledge is produced, Hartstock,(1983). We aim to bring those at the margins into the centre through the creation and variety of voices of oppressed women as they reflect on their experiences.

We are using the Stand point theory derived from Marxism. It suggest that knowledge is inescapable position bound (Essof 2013 :9).The differing positions within society create a system that can privilege some while devaluing others. In this case, the marginalized group, work to understand not only their own standpoints but also the underlying structures of the dominant standpoint. Essof (2013) argues that the oppressed might have an 'epistemic advantage' as discussed by Hartsock,(1983) that of having knowledge of the practices of both their own context and those of their oppressors. This advantage is thought to lead to critical insights and can lead to undermining and subverting dominance and power as a result of operating in the two contexts. One can see the hostile terrains and employ strategies that advance justice. My own position is that of a feminist, a woman of African descent. With me, is a history in which my mother was a victim of child pledging who ran away to the mission station to be saved from marrying a man old enough to be her grandfather. I am working in the terrain of situated know ledges and I present my work as a critical engagement with my context, the world of an African woman as I have been able to view ,research and document it.

SAMPLE

This was a 'purposive sample' of four women who were selected as representative of the cross section of women taking up positions that were the domain of men. One is heading a parastatal in the mining sector; the other two head other government structures. The last one is an independent consultant and business woman. They reflect a tribal spread and are all African women who were housewives. At marriage only one had a complete set of 5 O levels. They all began by studying and re-writing 'O levels' by distance learning.

It took me five years to get the full compliment and it was like a joke as my daughter would volunteer to teach me some of the subjects.

OPEN –ENDED CONVERSATIONS

Our entry point was through a discussion of their last schooling and the discussion led to narratives of how and what led them to begin

improving their education. We contacted four conversations which lasted about an hour. The conversations were held at different places such as places of work, the home or over tea in a restaurant. Some conversations rolled out into consecutive days and were recorded as well as fully transcribed. Notes were taken during conversation. The method helping both the researchers and the women to reflect deeply.

You have made me think back and reflect on some of the actions I took at that time. I think I was very brave and determined. I had this burning ambition and knew that I was quite capable.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data on the women's narratives was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Documents, such as the profiles of the conversant, (as we shall call the sample) were also collected. Newspaper scan that we concentrated on was the Herald which is a daily paper and the Zimbabwe Independent for stories profiling achievements by women. There was more negative reporting than positive stories on women.

Data analysis was done concurrently while gathering data when the narratives were put into themes and perspectives. Significant statements were analysed into generation of meaning units especially in the retelling of the stories. Interpretation or meaning of the data was then discussed and action for reform and change discussed.

RESULTS

First, the demographic variable of the women will be given followed their narratives, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they faced. The impact of their achievements will be presented.

The women (n=4) were 54 to 58 years and 3 were married, 1 widowed. Their socio-economic status would be middle class to affluent. Three had attained first degrees and two had an MBA, and MSc, one has attained a PhD. One had done professional courses in cookery and running successful businesses. They had supplemented their 'O levels' over periods ranging from 3 to 5 years and this was done in between delivering babies and following the husband's career and as and when an opportunity arises. Conversant 3 registered to write two subjects and had to abandon writing the exam at the last minute because;

My mother in-law came to stay with us when she was discharged from hospital for home based care and I had no choice but to shelve my studies for the 8 months till her death, even though all I needed to do was take time off to write the exams. No one would have

understood it and I would have been accused of neglecting her.

TIME FOR STUDIES

Getting time for studying was not easy. They had to make sure everyone in the family was sorted out first. Even the ones with domestic help they still needed to check the laundry, food preparations their family schedules and commitments. Conversant3 had this to say;

I remember that I was late handing in an assignment and I desperately wanted to finish it up but the Family wanted to have a get together at my house. Needless to say I had no choice as I also ended up being the hostess and all the time my mind was on my unfinished assignment. I completed it when everyone had gone to bed at 3 am.

Others however appreciated having their week's documents for their courses in advance and downloading them and having the ability to read them in their own time well before group interaction on line. And even when they missed live chats they were able to post their reflections in their own time.

RESOURCES FOR STUDIES

All the women reported that, although it was not exactly a secret that they were studying it was not something considered serious or important by their families. Therefore no provision was made in terms of resources for their studies.

Conversant 2 narrates;

when I asked for a computer, my husband gave me the one my son had stopped using because it had a limited memory and it was an older model.

I only got internet because my daughter needed to access emails and facilitate her applications to Universities.

Feelings of being isolated:-

The women reported that they were able to learn the use of Skype and face book as tools in their personal learning. Live synchronous chats with course instructors and other students helped in making them feel part of the world and not feel isolated at all.

Conversant1 was uncomfortable uploading her reflections onto blogs since they were public domains. However when she understood about 'shallow' and 'deep' webs and that shallow relates to what we are able to find when we Google ourselves and personal information is not public information and can be protected, she reported that she enjoyed participating and sharing other people's reflections as well as using blogs to generate a following.

Lifelong learning:-

All four women reported excitement in finding that they could continue learning using

emerging technologies. They also reported that they were learning exactly what they wanted to learn and not things that did not apply in their lives. For example, Conversant 2 loved cooking and enrolled into cookery classes that ended up with her acquiring business courses and is now running a successful Catering company. Lifelong learning meant continuous acquiring of knowledge and skills besides basic survival skills. Everything is changing fast, they reported and in order to remain open to new ideas technologies are making our learning processes easier.

The learning environment:-

The women felt that the way they were learning may not be formal as we are used to but it encouraged participation, collaboration and networking. For example, they reported that they were networking with people in South Africa on 'Moodle' platform. When the teachers posted a video or materials for them they were able to learn to use tools such as WordPress, Youtube and facebook to come up with their own thoughts or reflections regarding a given subject. Classmates would comment and give instant feedback to each person's thoughts and they reported that as fulfilling. Other social networks such as LinkedIn kept them in touch with people with similar interest as themselves and also up to date with current information in their fields without going out of the home.

Working Environment:-

The working environment has changed too. Conversant 3 had this to say;

I am so glad to have taken a course in Business Administration on line because my first job was done by Skype and when I got the job, they allowed me to work from home as I was still breastfeeding. They organization is so advanced that even my husband was impressed that I could do my work and earn a living at home while producing high quality work

DISCUSSION

Statistics on women's work is misleading as women's unpaid labour in the household has not been recognized. The exclusion or invisibility of women's contribution to the economy is therefore distorted. The education gap between boys and girls continued into this decade due to this undervaluing of domestic work. Women who are involved on trading do it informally and as a result it is not recognized. Women have realized that the odds against them are high. The State as mentioned earlier on has put in legislation and policies to improve the situation for women. However patriarchy gets in the way both at state level and household level. This is how the women

in my study viewed their situation and planned to change their position without antagonizing anyone.

In addressing marginalization of women, education plays a big role and for the majority of women access to education is limited. Getting a second chance to complete their education is a privilege for the few. However the sprouting of Distance education has been seen as a window of opportunity to improve the positions of many. New technologies are making an impact in education, offering better educational and social opportunities than ever before for women. This is the time that E-learning has allowed people to share and manage knowledge and skills as well as get the right information to the right people whenever they need it. Education is one area where there has been an impact. It is possible for regions to enhance communication with other countries and offer better educational and social opportunities without them leaving their homes.

What do social media mean for women?

As narrated by my conversant, women are getting information behind closed doors. They have a chance to catch up with news and current events as well as professional information from communicating with others in their field. They are also able to identify relevant information that is relevant to area of interest. A great number of people took up nursing and teaching careers not so long ago because that was what was being offered and one had just those choices. Then one would go through a curriculum that would take one through some irrelevant information that would not be applicable locally. Things have changed and online courses can be tailor-made to suite one's interest.

Collaboration with others at a distance came out very strongly in the study. Women used to gather where they collect water and exchange information and ideas in the olden days. However nowadays they are able to use social networks by building on-line communities through groups or followers. When studying, the informants used web conferencing, where they had live meetings with their tutors and other students in their classes. They reported that the experience was so great that they were learning and meeting with people from different countries on the virtual platform. Robinson in(Bourne and Moore,2005) supported this view when he said that properly designed and constructed on line courses engage learners better, increase their retention, improve student outcomes and greatly increase access to higher education.

Constructivist learning:-

All learning involves mental construction and occurs in our minds as we create and adjust internal mental structures to accommodate new knowledge. My informants in the study explained that their learning was tied to their experiences and the context of such experience. They felt empowered when they realized that knowledge was unique to them as individuals. This is important as Swan (2011) supports the position that cognitive constructivism locates learning in the mind of the individual and as an active process of mental construction it is linked to interaction with the environment. The women in the study were able to choose areas of interest to them and created an environment in the virtual world that enabled them, not just to get qualifications, but to have a choice of what to study. Then going ahead and use that knowledge to advance themselves in their chosen fields as the example of one interested in cooking, who ended up taking business courses to help with her catering business. This helped them break into the men's world and excel.

CONCLUSION

It is widely recognized that the women empowerment is central to development and the concern has been to advance the rights of women. Our past recent history has shown that women do contribute a lot to the household and development can be speeded up when there is recognition of every one's efforts.

Online pedagogy has been known to improve face to face pedagogy and asynchronous learning network allow for the freedom of learning in your own time and space. It gives opportunities for reflective thinking while allowing students to connect with other learners and have new interactions. The opportunities that education opened for the four housewives in my study would have remained a pipe dream for them had they not engaged with the virtual environment.

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