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Repositioning Social Media As Women's Voice For Fostering Gender Equity

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative analysis of how social media have been positioned to assume the voice of the voiceless and as a veritable tool in the hands of women to foster gender sensitivity and women liberation across national boundaries. Social media platforms, which include Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, among others, are being deployed to give voice to the voiceless. Hasta activism has, nonetheless, offered great opportunity to women in showcasing various injustices and discriminatory tendencies they have suffered across the globe. It has also become a strategy to sensitize and mobilize the women folk to speak out and challenge society for their rights. The paper adopted the secondary method (library study) in reviewing numerous online-activism involving women's agitation against sociocultural, political and economic deprivations, discriminations and injustices against their members in various societies. The paper concludes that the ubiquity of social media and their capacity to engage people irrespective of socio-cultural, economic, political and national frontiers have engendered a far greater opportunity for achieving gender equity. It is the position of this paper therefore that social media have the propensity to lift gender sensitivity and women liberation issues to the front burner of both national and international discourse and should therefore be repositioned to assume women's voices that were ab initio unheard.

Keywords: Repositioning, Social media, Women's voice, Fostering, Gender equity.

Introduction

The prediction by Marshal McLuhan in 1962 about the world becoming a global village through the instrumentality of the Internet has not only become a reality but has also led to the unfolding revolutions being witnessed across the globe today. The distance to the farthest part of the world is now a click away (Ezebuenyi, Ezegwu & Onuigbo, 2014). With the emergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which is a harbinger of social media platforms that offer immeasurable opportunities to citizens of the world to relate with one another, share ideas and experiences as well as become a voice for the hitherto voiceless in the society. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have changed the entire landscape of gathering and sharing information among people irrespective of location and time. Social media enable the sharing of information, ideas, thoughts and experiences across a particular network.

Globally, social media are used not only for dissemination of information and expression of opinions, but they are today deployed as channels for sensitization and mobilization of individuals and groups in achieving a common course. In the words of Sharma (2014), social media are interactive, web-based media which engage key players in a communication channel in defining and determining the message content. From the definition given, one can deduce that social media users design and create messages and share to many irrespective of the influence these messages would have on the numerous users of a particular platform (Ezebuenyi & Edike, 2020).

Social media platforms, which include Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, among others, are today deployed to give voice to the voiceless (Igboeli & Ezebuenyi, 2021). Active users are people who own and use internet-based phones, tablets and computers. Social media have made an impactful transformation on how information is packaged and shared all over the world including the relationship between citizens

and governments (Shirky, 2011). Despite being used as a social networking tool, social media give any individual the leverage to share content and opinions to universal audience, transcending traditional media or other modes of disseminating information (European Parliament, 2013).

Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have been utilized by activists around the world to organize and share live events to a broad online audience. This was the strategy deployed during the Arab Spring Movement (Pew Research Center, 2012). Social media have made it possible for local issues to become global concerns and local activists become connected with global citizens. In the last decade however, various social media platforms have been engaging with a cross-section of gender equality actors, from civil society to governments, as a means of promoting women's voices in a variety of decision-making fora. There are presently various online movements spotlighting gender issues across the globe.

The Place of the Media in Promoting Women Advancement and Empowerment

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action identified and foretold the media's potential to make a far-reaching impact in becoming a veritable voice for the advancement and empowerment of women. The challenges in utilising the media as discussed during the Beijing Conference were to combat discrimination, counter gender stereotypes and raise awareness of women's rights issues. All over the world, women are found to be greater users of social media than their male counterpart (McPherson, 2014), but many women, especially in developing countries, still do not have access to this technology due to infrastructure, costs as well as discriminatory social norms (ICRW, 2010).

The key arguments shared during a recent Wikigender online discussion on "advancing women's rights through social media" held that with effective strategies, women can be sensitized to know their rights in the society. It posits that with a successful social media campaign certain stumbling blocks can be countered. It concludes by recommending how social media can effectively broaden the scope for action on women's rights and gender equality within a post-2015 agenda of Sustainable Development Goals no.5. Its position also urges women's rights movements to be quick to capitalise on social media's unprecedented socio-economic and political awareness-raising potential. At the Wikigender online discussion, participants stressed the salience of using social media to offer gender activists the opportunity to connect within and across borders, at a low cost. The proliferation of female bloggers has also enabled the attraction of a younger generation of activists, which represents a core target audience to disrupt known stereotypes and facilitate the move for gender sensitivity and women liberation.

The emerging social media potentialities have given women a new space to speak up and be heard. Social media have armed women with their power and capacity to encourage solidarity and collect shared experiences. Social media platforms have become a new frontier for women's rights activists to organize and foster online activism to join the fight for equality and justice. From every cadre of women: from those in politics, legislatures to farmers and small business owners, there are conversations and connections for women around the world to support one another in the push for gender sensitivity and women liberation. Social media as an agent of the society have been known to influence people and even cause attitudinal change (Ross, 2020; Ezebuenyi Anagba, & Okika, 2018). It is not surprising that the way the social media pervade our lives, their misrepresentation of gender may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women (Griffin, 2012).

Social Media Strategies in Effectively Making Women's Voices to be Heard

The emergence of social media has proved to be an effective channel for showcasing women's rights issues to the front burner of public discourse, galvanising and mobilising them for action all over the world and as well urging policy makers to step up commitments to foster gender sensitivity. Recent cases in Turkey and India are no doubt reflections of

the potentialities of social media to bridge the gap which has hitherto separated grassroots women's activism from policy-making processes.

The pervasiveness of social media and wide spread use by women of new technologies represent salient opportunities to draw the concerns of gender sensitivity and women liberation to the forefront of media attention for onward spread to policy makers. Social media, in addition to being agents of socialization, are believed to be main setters of public agenda.

Every 30th June, Social Media Day is being celebrated. The celebration hinges on praising women and men who are leading action in online spaces and using the power of social media for good. Hashtag activism has practically helped to foster the concerns of the female folk and draw public attention to women's rights. This has been achieved by increasing the visibility of issues that are under-reported in mainstream media.

Role of Hashtag Activism in Bringing Women Issues to the Forefront of Public Discourse

#MeToo:

Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo movement to create a platform for girls with similar experiences to connect with one another in a safe space. In 2017, a global deluge of disclosures and solidarity from women who were hitherto silent about their experiences of sexual assault rose from their hitherto hidden corners by just a tweet from actress Alyssa Milano and sparked.

Since then, #MeToo has spread across the globe and crossed racial, economic and other boundaries. In France, it echoed with the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc, in Italy with #QuellaVoltaChe, in Turkey with #SendeAnlat, across the Arab States with #AnaKaman, in China with #RiceBunny, in Spain with #Cuentalo, and so on. Over time, the digital campaign contributed to real-life results causing perpetrators to face justice. It also led to companies adjusting their policies and as well many people all over the world started having conversations on consent and ending sexual harassment.

#TimesUp:

Like #MeToo gained global attention, Monica Ramirez, president of the Alianza Nacional de Campesinasto, an organization that seeks to end the exploitation of women farmworkers in the United States of America, penned an open letter of solidarity to women in Hollywood after they had come forward with evidences to share their experiences.

From the unlikely alliance, the #TimesUp movement was born, using the loudest voices in service of the most marginalized, and creating unity to break the silence around sexual harassment, end gender discrimination and fight for gender equality.

#NiUnaMenos:

Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) started with a group of journalists and writers that got fed up with the daily news about murdered women that were shown in a sweeping manner and were received with great passiveness, according to one of the founders of the movement, Vanina Escales. The campaign against gender-based violence especially, 'femicide,' which started in 2015 as a protest by artists, journalists and academics in Argentina, quickly spread across Latin American countries and has, as well, led to the formation and development of feminist alliances across the continent.

In 2015, Ni Una Menos meaning never again for women, with a simple, clear and common language, said not one less (ni una menos). We welcomed all (people) to join. It was a massive protest that checked the social structures of the country. Today, and more so since 2015, there is a new social pact, Not Without Us. There cannot be a social pact without us.

#HeForShe:

In 2014, Actress and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Watson, invited men to join the movement for gender equality by taking part in the #HeForShe campaign. Since the launch, men and women around the world have used #HeForShe to declare their commitment to end gender discrimination and to invite others to join the movement. UN Women's successful and high-

profile #HeForShe campaign further highlights the potential of social media to attract new and larger audiences: the campaign engaged with more than 1.2 billion people, showcasing the universal spotlight to draw the attention and engage men and boys to achieve gender equality.

#OrangeTheWorld:
Every year, from the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November to Human Rights Day on 10 December, we commemorate the 16 Days of Action of Gender-Based Violence by calling on the global community to #OrangeTheWorld. From lighting buildings and landmarks in orange and hosting events decked in the color, we call on everyone around the world to take action to raise awareness and prevent violence against women and girls.

#EverydaySexism:
In spring 2012, author Laura Bates set up a website called The Everyday Sexism Project to catalogue instances of sexism that women experience on a daily basis. The aim of the project was to encourage women to share their stories of sexism, no matter how minor they may seem, and expose the stark reality to the world that sexism is very much alive and widespread, and mostly so normalized within our societies that we don't even protest most of the time. When the project became a hashtag, the conversation became global and unstoppable. The backlash filled with hateful comments and abusive reactions were as strong as the testimonials from women. But, even in the face of the negative responses, women's strength and resilience shone through.

#WomenShould:
A series of ads, developed as a creative idea for UN Women by Memac Ogilvy and Mather Dubai in 2013, used genuine Google searches to reveal the widespread prevalence of sexism and discrimination against women. The studies carried out on 9th March, 2013 held that the ads revealed negative sentiments such as stereotyping and outright denial of women's rights. Reinforcing the urgency to continue making the case for women's rights, empowerment and equality, the hashtag #WomenShould exploded across social media and generated worldwide discussion.

#YesAllWomen:
On 23 May 2014, a man killed six people and then himself, leaving behind a manifesto in which he stated that the reason was because he wanted to punish women for rejecting him and he envied attractive men who could accomplish things he couldn't. Days after that terrible event, social media platforms became a space where people of all genders expressed their horror and solidarity with the victims and their loved ones. They also assumed a space for serious conversations about sexual harassment, rape and misogyny. While at first the conversation was about how #NotAllMen are like that, it soon grew as a counter-testimony with the hashtag #YesAllWomen, highlighting how the aforementioned crime was the result of a culture of misogyny, sustained by toxic attitudes that surround all of us, subtly reinforcing the patriarchal ideas of alpha masculinity and submissive femininity.

#WhyIStayed:
Today, some 30 per cent of women worldwide who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner over their lifetime. Considering to leave and or leaving an abusive relationship is a complicated process rather than an instant event. Beverly Gooden, a writer, wanted to explain this in November 2014, when she shared her story of domestic violence with #WhyIStayed, in reaction to people who were questioning why women don't just leave if they are survivors of domestic abuse. She then asked her followers to share their experiences using #WhyIStayed, and soon the hashtag became a movement, raising awareness about the ugly power dynamics of domestic abuse, shedding light on experiences of survivors and creating a community of support.

#IWillGoOut:
When women across India were outraged and fed

up with victim-blaming in cases of sexual harassment and sexist comments, they wanted to channel their anger into action, so they turned to social media to organize. Through the hashtag #IWillGoOut, like-minded individuals started to connect, and soon the conversation echoed on the streets with the nationwide #IWillGoOut march that mobilized and brought together women from all walks of life to protest sexual harassment and gender inequality in India. Immediately the protests were over, activists turned back to social media platforms and continued the conversation, which transformed into monthly meetings to converse for policies that would further the demand for gender equality and safeguard women's rights.

#GenerationEquality:

In 2020, the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with a new campaign, Generation Equality: Realizing women's rights for an equal future was celebrated. The celebration called on everyone, to take up the unfinished business of the Beijing Declaration and demand equality now. Show your support using #GenerationEquality on social media!

#BringBackOurGirls:

In April 2014, 276 teenage girls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria were abducted from their school hostel by the terrorist group, Boko Haram. Most people in the community including parents resorted to use social media to spark global outrage and created the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. This action has led to more than 100 of the kidnapped girls being found or released while many remain missing. Bring Back Our Girls has become a lasting movement in Nigeria, where it has expanded to include calls for action around many human rights abuses, such as other kidnappings and killings, as well as action for safety and security, healthcare and economic reform. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign reached over 1 million tweets, helping to raise awareness of both national and international actors of the need to help rescue the abducted Nigerian schoolgirls from Chibok (Tomchak, 2014). Before the successes recorded using hashtag campaigns, the case received little media attention (Dewey, 2014).

Deploying Social Media in Tackling Violence against Women and Enhancing Public Accountability towards Gender Equality

Online social media platforms have enhanced female victims' opportunities to share their experiences of violence with other victims, creating a space to exchange knowledge and information on their rights, legal processes and welfare services. In 2010, HarassMap was launched in Egypt as an online mapping tool to allow victims to anonymously report cases of sexual harassment directly from their mobile phone. This initiative of crowd-sourcing has helped in mapping the reports coupled with campaigns to draw attention to the scale of the problem in Egypt (Young, 2014). Social media use has been in the increase by women's grassroots organisations to converse for greater public accountability towards gender equality.

Following the 2012 gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, the #DelhiGangRape hashtag campaign brought the scale of gender-based violence in India into the spotlight. The campaigns with hashtags have been used to support public street mobilisation. The foregoing also led the government to introduce specific anti-rape provisions in the Criminal Code (Sharma, 2014). Also, the rape and murder of a young woman in Turkey led to a mass Twitter protest through the hashtags #sendeanlat (tell your story) and #ozceganaslan. Large street protests provoked a discussion among political and civil society leaders about violence against women in the country (Forbes, 2014).

Conclusion

Gender issue has remained topical among researchers and policy makers alike over the time. In Nigeria, the clamour for more equitable distributions of positions to favour the women folk, dismantling of cultural impediments against women empowerment and other such issues relating to gender equality have been highlighted by the mass media without adequate result. However, it is believed that social media have the capacity to

bring these issues to forefront of national discourse than conventional media platforms. Technology - enabled social media have made online activism increasingly prevalent for sharing information and organizing people to express resistance to dominant organizational elites. In various countries of the world, ICT tools have been used by the masses and groups with special interest to demand reforms for good governance and justice intended for the realization of the aspirations of the masses.

The logic that women are by nature the weaker sex and therefore need special privileges by reinforcing the argument that the universe is a man's world and women cannot find a survival space has been long with us. Despite the aforementioned logics having their merits, the main concern of this study is that the problems go beyond these presentations. Therefore, any changes that may take place must start with dismantling these basic stereotypes such that relative space can be created for the triumph of the woman in modern society. Social media, therefore, appear to be one of the effective ways to achieve the dismantling of these hiccups in gender equity in the world and women must take the bull by the horns.

The ubiquity of social media, their capacity to engage people irrespective of socio-cultural, economic, political and national frontiers have engendered a far greater opportunity for achieving gender sensitivity and women liberation. This submission is evidenced in the various online social movements that used hashtags (#) in making their voices heard as well as getting justices over their demands in most cases. It is the position of this paper therefore that social media have the propensity to lift gender sensitivity and women liberation issues to the front burner of both national and international discourse to receive global attention.

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