Moving the centre without Conflict; Gender and Virtual Empowerment 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 Schmidt (1996). In addressing marginalization, women in Southern Africa have made significant achievements and have excelled in a variety of fields, including the male domain Gandari & Mutsau (2014). 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 Frissen, (2000). 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. Qualitative research seeks to build a holistic largely narrative description of phenomena. This is appropriate for this study because it seeks to explore lived experiences of women who managed to access and improve their education through use of technology. 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.

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 Growe & Montgomery (2000), Gumbi (2006). In developing countries women to a large extent are often marginalized since culturally their place is supposed to be in the home Boesrup (1969). 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 peoples 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 (Jensen, 1998). 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. SADC Gender Protocol (2013) Zimbabwe pg48. 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) 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 extend. 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 Frissen (2000). It was now being used to exchange views, experiences and news with other gender activists in a world-wide public forum United Nation (UN) (1991). 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 counter parts 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 dignify 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.” www.awid.org

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 un-
derstand how they constructed their social
reality in everyday interaction given their
position as mothers, wives and individuals.

In developing feminist research we be-
lieve that we need to engage in critical re-
fection that surfaces the challenges of this
kind of research in Africa. Feminists have
argued that it is necessary to make the re-
searcher visible in order to understand the
epiphenomenological 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 de-
derived from Marxism. It suggest that knowl-
edge is inescapable position bound (Essof
2013 :9). The differing positions within soci-
ety 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 un-
derlying structures of the dominant stand-
point. Essof (2013) argues that the oppressed
mighty have an ‘epistemic advantage’ as dis-
cussed 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 operat-
ing in the two contexts. One can see the hos-
tile terrains and employ strategies that ad-
vance 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 engage-
ment with my context, the world of an Afri-
can woman as I have been able to view, re-
search 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 house-
wives. At marriage only one had a complete
set of 5 O levels. They all began by studying
and re-writing ‘O levels’ by distance learn-
ing.

It took me five years to get the full com-
pliment 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 be-
gen improving their education. We conducted
four conversations which lasted about an
hour. The conversations were held at differ-
et places such as places of work, the home
or over tea in a restaurant. Some conversa-
tions rolled out into consecutive days and
were recorded as well as fully transcribed.
Notes were taken during conversation. The
method helped both the researchers and the
women to reflect deeply.

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

Data Analysis

Data on the women’s narratives was re-
corded and transcribed verbatim. Docu-
ments, such as the profiles of the conver-
sant, (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 socioeconomic 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 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.

Conversant 1 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说;

*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. The 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 im-
prove 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 net work 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.

**Recommendations**

The older generation is more realistic in the way they present themselves on line and in the extent to which they would trust contacts online than young children therefore opportunities for use of the internet should be more readily available in homes than before.

Live synchronous chats with course instructors and other students should be organized for distance learners to make them feel part of the world of learning and not feel isolated at all.

Network formation worldwide is no longer limited by boundaries, therefore shared interests should contribute to the development of new communities with a virtual character for women. Women’s access to knowledge will make them good role models for young girls therefore at every opportunity they should get publicity as a way of encouraging young girls.

Online courses can be tailor-made to suit a wide variety of interest. This means that research on current interest should be on going so that courses offered online are current. Women have social responsibilities which they take seriously. Access to new technologies will help them to study in their own time while participating fully in social activities such as attending church meetings and funerals. Higher Education should invest in teaching computer appreciation.

In the past, women have suffered from lack of knowledge of laws that affect their lives, with access to information on the internet, travel expenses to get information are cut, and empowerment programmes will influence women’s participation much more than before. We recommend internet cafes in churches, and women clubs for those who cannot afford to own computers in their homes.

This research opens up the debate on the cultural value and social purpose of social network sites. Future studies should

1. Include research on women from small-sized populations and different geographical areas.
2. Explore how the different cultural, socio-economic and ethnic groups among women utilize social media as a socializing tool in order to gain an understanding of how people of diverse backgrounds form the social identity online.
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