

Women Rights Activists Never Stopped Talking: From Formal Women's Movements to Informal and Fluid Networks Through the Empowerment Discourse in Post-Donor Aid Botswana

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Abstract

This paper explores the narratives of women in Botswana seeking 'empowerment' outside the realm of formal development actors and political structures. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, the post-independence development era saw the influx of much needed financial aid from international donors which benefited women's non-governmental organisations and the Women's Affairs Unit in the Ministry of Home Affairs in Botswana. However, the elevation of Botswana to upper-middle income status in 1992 heralded substantial reductions in donor aid. The result of the donor flight from Botswana has been the reversal of many gains made in women's activism. While the decline in donor funding is regrettable, it would be misleading to claim that women in Botswana have stopped efforts to confront patriarchy. What has emerged is a burgeoning discourse around 'empowerment of young women' by various local actors, with and without support of donor funding. This includes utilisation of the cyberspace. Problematic as the term 'empowerment' may be, it has found a lot of resonance with many women, young and old, so that there has emerged a plethora of 'generational dialogues', youth empowerment seminars, high teas, and foundations registered, around the needs of 'the girl child'. While the developments may not take a directly 'political' posture, our proposal is that they are part of the continuation of conversations around Botswana women's politics of culture, representation, autonomy and agency. They also are indicative of an interesting intersection between a neo-liberal rights-based agenda of collective movements and a more agentic and personalised efforts, yet within a collective outlook.

Keywords: Women, Rights, Activism, Movements, Donor Funding, Empowerment

Introduction

The successes and failures of the women's rights movement in Botswana are well documented. The dominant narrative about the state of gender equality activism in Botswana is that while the 1980s and 1990s were a period of heightened women's mobilisation, women had since gone quiet or even 'stopped talking' (Bauer 2011) or the 'Grey and shrinking: the state of the Botswana feminist movement' (*Sunday Standard* 2014). According to the adherents of this narrative of a declining women's movement, the 'height' of gender activism roughly lasted the decade between 1986 and 1996. Two points of comparison are used to lay the claim that the 'heydays' of the women's movement in Botswana are over. The baseline is the early post-independence period, which is taken to have been strongly patriarchal, with women's political participation seen as 'indeed little more than an extension of their submissive domestic role' (Geisler 1995:547).

In this paper we show that women in Botswana have never gone quiet, but rather have found various ways of drawing from the frame of 'empowerment'. Although initially driven from a top-down approach by leading development actors such as the United Nations (UN), to 'empower' and 'capacitate' the women of the Global South so that they effectively participate in development processes, there has been a twist to the narrative. Even with dwindling donor funding, the notion of empowerment found traction and resonance with many women; young and old, religious and activist, political and non-political.

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This paper does not purport to be an exhaustive glossary of the ways in which conversations around patriarchy, leadership, and gender have continued. It provides insights into current forms of feminism and gender activism in Botswana post donor funding and at a time of less political will on the part of the state to invest in gender equality efforts. It challenges gender scholars to look beyond formal organising around gender equality, lest we mistake the undeniable weakening of formal gender activism due to lack of donor funding to an actual collapse in efforts to confront patriarchy. The position taken here is that we need to engage in deeper conversations around political participation, especially in talking about gender equality, where the truism for a long time has been that the personal is political. We need to explore how women have engaged with power without political representation; by drawing from non-overt political repertoires such as religion, sexuality and business. Specifically, women have drawn ambiguously and ambitiously from the notion of ‘empowerment’ to extend their audiences beyond numbers in parliament. While many scholars have questioned the usefulness of ‘empowerment’, and decried its tendency to depoliticise the gender equality agenda, we argue that, more than any other concept, ‘empowerment’, even with its weaknesses, has helped continue the conversation around women’s rights and capabilities.

Women’s Activisms

Documentation on Botswana women’s struggle for gender equality refers to the 1980’s as a time of mobilisation within and outside the State – two parallel and related trajectories against the background of the globalisation of women’s empowerment efforts¹ (Mookodi 2005a; Mookodi *et al.* 2005b). The establishment of the Women’s Affairs Unit (WAU) in the Ministry of Home Affairs 1981 was regarded by local women’s rights organisations and the international development community as a sign of the political will by the government of Botswana towards the achievement of gender equality (Mosime *et al.* 2012). With the key objective of ‘Integrating Women in Development’², the Unit achieved much of its mandate through the inter-ministerial - civil society hybrid Women’s Planning and Advisory Committee (WODPLAC). At the time, the three key women’s organisations were the Botswana Council of Women (BCW), the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the Women’s Chapter of the Botswana Christian Council (BCC). While the ‘convenient marriage’ between government and civil societies was fraught with tension over interpretations of rights and roles of women, it provided a platform for bringing women’s issues to the fore.³

The work of women’s organisations in the 1970s and early 1980s has been regarded as focusing primarily on social welfare issues emphasising women’s domestic roles (Geisler 2004 and Bauer 2011). In the meantime, the participation of prominent leader-members in party politics has been interpreted as collusion with patriarchy⁴ and without a ‘feminist outlook’. Botswana women’s non-partisan and civil-society-based political agency became visible in the 1980s. As indicated by Bauer (2011) and others, much of the work was centred on the legal status of women – notably through the formation of Emang Basadi in 1986.

According to the former Attorney General Athaliah Molokomme, Emang Basadi emerged from informal weekly meetings of friends and colleagues at the University of Botswana as well as others who shared an interest in women’s issues in Botswana and internationally (Molokomme 1991). Through its

1 Notably the first United Nations International Decade for Women 1975 to 1985 and associated interventions at regional and national levels.

2 This mandate was in consonance with the emphasis on the role of women in economic development and the related Women in Development framework during the first UN Decade for Women.

3 For various interpretations of the relationships between the women’s organisations, government and WODPLAC by women’s rights activists of the time see Molokomme, 1986, 1991; Geisler, 2004; van Allen, 2005; Bauer, 2011

4 The wives of leaders of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party were regarded as furthering the mandates of their husbands’ party-political ambitions by Gizela Geisler (2004).

objectives of improving women's civil and political rights and enhancing their access to economic resources through documentation, debate and activism, Emang Basadi laid the foundation for further individual and collective action on legal rights and gender equality in Botswana.

An example of individual action is Unity Dow versus the Botswana Attorney General in 1992. Dow fought to be able to extend her citizenship to her children regardless of their father's origin. Following the ruling that gender discrimination is unconstitutional, there was a call for extensive legal reforms to remove sexism from key legislation including the Citizenship, Employment, Marriage and Deeds Registry Acts. Organisations that were formed at the time include the Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), Ditshwanelo – Botswana Centre for Human Rights, Metlhaetsile Women's Information Centre, Women Against Rape (WAR), the Botswana Network of Ethics, Law and HIV and AIDS (BONELA), and the Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO).

However, by the late second decade of the new millennium, the tables had turned. Organisations doing gender activism and outreach were struggling for funding, and many closed down or operated with skeletal staff. Research outputs and training activities began to dwindle. A number of leading activists joined government and became senior public servants. Others became consultants, and yet others shifted attention to other projects. 'Gender fatigue'⁵ was declared within academic and civil society circles. One of the main factors associated with this condition was the decline in donor funding.

Donor Funding and its Impact on Organised Gender Activism in Botswana

Having started at independence in 1966 as one of the poorest nations in the world, Botswana became a donor darling for the first twenty years of independence on the grounds of what bilateral and multilateral donors regarded as her favourable development environment (Kerapeletswe *et al.* 2008:18). While Botswana's former colonial master Britain through the Overseas Development Agency (ODA) provided approximately 60% of the recurrent budget of Botswana by independence (Kerapeletswe *et al.* 2008:18), including The Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV),⁶ Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) and the Danish development cooperation agency (DANIDA). SIDA and NORAD formed a united aid alliance. SIDA became the second major bilateral donor. Along with the UN these organisations supported capacity building of the Women's Affairs Unit, women's non-governmental organisations, as well as women-focused urban and rural programmes and projects aimed at poverty reduction, sexual and reproductive health, democracy and human rights, environment and climate change, democracy and human rights.

It would suffice to say that one would conclude that the period was marked by donor-dependent gender activism in government and civil society. Botswana was graduated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1992 to an upper-middle-income country. Good as the news could sound, it heralded declining donor support. Pressure had been mounting on donors, particularly the European Commission institutions, to increase the proportion of aid going to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Lower-Income Countries (LICs) by reducing aid to Middle-Income Countries (MICs) (Glennie 2011). In their assessment of aid provided by the Scandinavian bloc, Kerapeletswe *et al.* (2008) noted that the reclassification had considerable effect on bilateral and multilateral donors. The major donors had already started to consider aid restructuring or exit.

The 1992 reclassification strengthened their view and had a considerable effect on both the conditions for multilateral aid and on the policies of bilateral aid donors. Many conveyed their intention to

⁵ As indicated by Jones (2007), Merriman (2009) and Williamson (2019) gender fatigue refers to decreases in the momentum of women's movements activism; often marked by declines in gender mainstreaming efforts in industry as well as donor and government funding for gender equality remaining static or declining.

⁶ Established in 1965, SNV was initially the Foundation for Netherlands Volunteers under the Netherlands Foreign Office and became a non-governmental international development organisation named Netherlands Development Organisation in 1992.

exit Botswana during that time. As Botswana was increasingly thought to have emerged out of poverty by donors and international development partners, the resulting problem was of a widening GINI co-efficient⁷, with the income, leadership and health gap between women and men worsening. This period was also marked by the reduction of international support for gender activism. This weakening institutional support for formal women's rights organisations forced them to cut down on staff, programmes and outreach. The decline in donor funding mainly affected the advancement of programming based on political gender quotas. Regarding gender quotas Margaret Nasha indicated that 'As long as it's survival of the fittest, women will have a tough time going into politics. As women, we also need a complete revolution where we will stand in the face of adversity and fight our way through because no one will do it for us' (Genderlinks 2019).

Gender quotas have been shown through empirical research to be a strong predictor of women's representation (Tripp and Kang 2008). Even with the weaknesses of the quota system, countries that have increased women's numbers in political decision making have mostly done it through enforcing some kind of quota system. Even in conservative countries such as Afghanistan where women are prevented from political leadership, they were able to increase participation of women through donor funded programmes with requirements for evidence of gender-balance, and prioritisation of projects by and for women (Beath *et al.* 2013). In Botswana, women's economic and political advancement became a prerogative of a highly patriarchal state, and receded in priority. Although they existed on paper in the constitutions of some of the local political parties, gender quotas became less and less of a concern. Without the support of the international community, women in Botswana remained helpless against the government as it resolutely refused to sign the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development⁸ because of its insistence on quotas.

Besides the decline in donor funding, the women's movement also suffered from inability to replace previously influential founding leaders of the organisations, such as Emang Basadi's Athaliah Molokomme and Metlhaetsile Women's Information Centre's Unity Dow. A weak membership base was another problem, leading to a perception that the movements were elitist and urban-based and lacking popular and rural-based support. Without underestimating the negative impact of both loss of donor funding, resources and leadership challenges within women's right organisations, it would be misleading to claim that women in Botswana have stopped efforts to confront patriarchy. Once women's organisations had opened up public space for women's voices, it could not be undone. What has emerged is a burgeoning popular discourse around 'empowerment of young women' by various local actors, with and without support of donor funding.

Theoretical Framework: Empowerment Without the 'Powers That Be': A Significant Shift after the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action

Recognising the multiple and conflicting elements within any particular period of activism (Hewitt 2012), we however identify the changes in the way women in Botswana confront patriarchy to signify a transition of feminisms. This period is marked by a number of shifts, but particularly the use of 'new media' as a platform for feminist engagements and movements. Grace Chirenje calls it the time of '*My Voice, My Space, My Power*' and although not all the time, Nathan Mukoma calls it a time of '*disruption and non-conformity*' (OSISA 2017). While the new types of engagement may not have the same focus of confronting structural imbalance in power relations as their predecessors, they, however, continue

7 With 0 being perfectly equality, and 1 being perfect inequality, Botswana's income gini index was estimated at 53% by the International Monetary Fund in 2018.

8 The Southern Africa Development Commission created the Gender Protocol binding member states to implement gender equality and equity measures.

to draw from and extend beyond structural forms of patriarchy. This focus on *My Voice, My Space, My Power* has created worry among the older generation of feminists that the current empowerment paradigm individualises what are actually much broader structural limitations (Phillips 2015) and hence doomed to fail.

While recognising the importance of never losing sight of structural diagnostics and prognostics in pushing for equality, however, we cannot continue the narrative that unless directly pointed at political representation, women's voices in Botswana should be ignored. In fact, in many instances, the same women who previously spoke from within the movement have continued to speak outside the formal movements they helped establish. Older and younger women in Botswana are visible and talking, with small pockets of support from international and local partners, and even on their own. Among them are Ntombi Setshwaelo and Elsie Alexander who have used traditional and new media to forge intergenerational networks and have created intersectional spaces for 'older' and 'newer' feminist agendas. Weaving together discourses of spirituality, sexuality, educational and financial success, and sometimes beauty and style, the concept of empowerment has been at the centre of initiatives surrounding category 'women'. Perhaps, some feminists such as Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie might have a problem with this seeming 'softening' in the approach to the fight against patriarchy, and might find it to be *feminism lite*. However, we cannot claim that Ntombi Setshwaelo or Elsie Alexander among others have gone quiet. They never stopped talking. For this reason, it should not come as a surprise that while women were said to have 'stopped talking', young women, such as Bogolo Kenewendo were still able to be heard enough to be appointed as full minister into the Botswana Cabinet in 2016. Another young woman, Kagiso Madibana, was able to scoop a top four position out of 50 000 Chevening alumni through her social entrepreneurship using new media. Many others such as Lillian Moremi continue to extend the space for participation in non-traditional ways. In 2019 Pelonomi Venson-Moitoi defied a long-held tradition in the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) by challenging the incumbent state and BDP President Mokgweetsi Masisi for the party's presidency. Whereas Moitoi-Venson was unsuccessful in her highly controversial bid it was a courageous move nonetheless.

Methodology

This paper is both an affirmation and a critique of feminism. It provides the importance of a guarded take on women's empowerment as well as acknowledging the dissonance between feminism from the academy and popular understandings of patriarchy (Glapka 2018). Where Chimamanda Adichie warns of '*feminism lite*', this paper affirms 'popular feminism' as it constantly challenges the tendency of academically-oriented feminism towards a kind of fundamentalism. By presenting several kinds of popular feminisms that have emerged in Botswana under the rubric of 'empowerment', the position taken in this paper is that, adherents of these kinds of popular feminisms are not necessarily 'lacking critical awareness and hence in need of emancipatory projects' (Glapka 2018). They themselves, provide emancipatory projects among their own, on their own terms, within their own discursive practices.

To map the state of popular feminism in Botswana, we collected a number of publicity posters by different actors; philanthropic, corporate, religious, political and activist, mobilising the notion of empowerment. In this way, we sought to reveal the ways in which women in Botswana continue to confront social inequalities in the face of unyielding and intensifying in-balance of power relations in post-independence contexts. We pay particular attention to ways in which women; especially young women have participated in state and non-state organising in the absence of sufficient representation in parliament.

Women's 'Empowerment' Initiatives: From High Teas to Prayer Warriors

O'Neil, Domingo and Valters (2014) define empowerment as a process of personal and social change

through which women gain power, meaningful choices and control over their lives. This, they argue, can be achieved primarily through collective action, legal and constitutional amendments, and through political activism. Whereas for feminists, the concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘women’s conference’ immediately conjure thoughts of the first women’s conference in Mexico in 1975, followed by Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995, the concepts have since come to be widely adopted in development, political, religious and business spaces in Botswana, often without any direct linkages with the discourse of achieving gender equality. For a decade after Beijing, women’s empowerment remained a largely gender activist or feminist notion, with little traction in popular discourse. A binary emerged between educated, well paid, liberated and ‘empowered’ women, and young, unemployed, sexually oppressed women who needed to become ‘empowered’. In spite of this tendency by development agencies and partners to insist on their lack of empowerment, women in Botswana and much of the Southern African region began to appropriate the employment discourse. To them this was not as something to wait to receive through external interventions, but as a reciprocal exchange of a number of material and non-material resources among women; spiritually and financially.

Problematic as the term ‘empowerment’ may be, it has found resonance with many women, young and old. Outside the development and political space, there has emerged a plethora of ‘inter-generational dialogues’, youth empowerment seminars, high teas as well as foundations being registered around ‘women empowerment’. While these events may not be seen as ‘directly political’ or ‘non-feminist’, we propose that they have continued the conversation around women’s leadership. Botswana has not witnessed a growing silence about women and their various concerns and ideas. Organisers often identify ‘high profile’ local or international personalities that are relatively popularly known, with various titles such as ‘motivational speaker’; life coach; wellness expert; personal branding expert; activist, influencer, Social Entrepreneur, etc. The speaker or speakers provide themes for their ‘talks’, such as ‘Unleashing the Tigress in You’, ‘Grabbing Destiny Against All Odds’, ‘Picking Up the Pieces’, ‘Getting in Touch with the Inner Person’, ‘Soldiering On’, and ‘The Power of Association’. Typically, the events are organised with the help of professional event organisers. The events often involve some amount of marketing and publicity, and depending on the budget, may be widely advertised in traditional and social media platforms. Attention is often paid towards creating a ‘beautiful’ set up at the event; including furniture, décor and food presentation. The women are to gain from these events; both empowering perspectives from those that have succeeded, share how they also succeeded and often use the time to unwind and give themselves self-love or ‘me time’. The dress code is also usually prescribed as a theme, such as ‘50’s vintage’, summer dresses, fascinators and hats or all white. Although many are free, normally, tickets are sold to attend these events, costing anything from P20 to more than P1500⁹ per person. More than ever before, young women in Botswana are identifying themselves as feminists, defying the myth that we had reached a ‘post-feminist’ period or that feminism was dead and buried.

The Church and Women’s Empowerment

In most feminist scholarship, the church and religion in general has long been dismissed as a gate-keeper of patriarchy. Churches have on the main avoided embracing the gender equality frame, often using the scriptures to insist that God made men and women at different times and for different purposes. By employing the empowerment frame, the church has been able to extend its reach to women not just as wives or potential wives, but as subjects that have other ambitions outside the home, which the church can encourage them to achieve. In this way, without necessarily adopting an injustice or rights-based frame, the church extends gender equality work, albeit within a largely male-led patriarchal heteronormative¹⁰ discourse.

⁹ Approximately US\$1.80 to US\$138.00 at the time of writing this paper.

Feminist literature in Botswana has celebrated Pentecostal churches as more open towards women playing leadership roles in the church than other denominations; giving them space to preach, speak in tongues and prophesy. However, the church remains full of what Rosinah Mmannana Gabaitse (2017) identifies as ‘tensions, contradictions and ambiguities’ because women are still expected to preserve traditional expectations of male superiority. Pentecostal churches have become a space that has mobilised ‘women’ and ‘empowerment’ in interesting ways. The interesting issue about faith-based women’s conferences is that, while many of the churches are led by men, the conferences are often hosted by the pastor’s wives and the speakers are local and internationally successful women pastors. Recently the rise of the prophetess and other women church leaders has received some attention, with feminist scholars divided about whether the increasing visibility of women in the pulpit is a move towards gender equality in the church. Musa Dube, a Botswana feminist theologian is convinced that, while women of Botswana undoubtedly continue to face many constraints due to the patriarchal nature of the church, they have not shied away from utilizing many alternative spaces, opportunities and strategies to take up leadership in the church (Dube 2014).

Bible Life Ministries is one of the leading Pentecostal churches that is at the forefront of these faith-based women empowerment projects, by encouraging the ‘woman of worth’ to ‘break levels’ and unlock ‘the power of a praying woman’. The annual Women of Faith Conferences, led by the pastor’s wife Tshogofatso Sitima, were launched in 2008. At the conferences, women are implored to take up and excel in their roles beyond the home. One guest speaker in 2018 told the participants to be the kind of woman who is a ‘W-orker, O-rganiser, M-anager, A-dvisor, N-ation-Builder’. From as early as the third conference in October 2010, the theme of the conference was ‘2010: A year of Change’, and according to one of the organisers, Caroline Mwape Lubwika¹⁰, it was ‘aimed at restoring and *empowering* women to face and triumph over challenges of life’. The church also regularly celebrates ‘Women of Distinction’, women that are high achievers in their jobs and businesses (Bible Life Ministries Gaborone, nd). Bible Life Ministries is among many other churches, such as the Christian Revival Church (CRC) and the Seventh Day Adventist Church that have adopted the empowerment frame. For example, the 2018 Young Adventist Women’s Ministries (YAWM) South Botswana Conference, was themed ‘The Beauty in You’, and was said to be aimed at *empowering young women* to seek ‘inner beauty’ with a purpose (Seventh Day Adventist Church 2018).

From Political Structures to Inner Peace: Ntombi Setshwaelo

A feminist-come-accredited inner peace champion, Ntombi Setshwaelo came to Botswana from South Africa and became one of the first University of Botswana expatriate academics, teaching English. By 1976, Setshwaelo was already considered a trouble-maker by the government of Botswana along with a number of fellow South African academics that called themselves the *Soweto Group* because they were seen as supporting university student demonstrations against the South African apartheid regime through the Academic Staff Association (Mokopakgosi 2008). Setshwaelo was to become one of the founders and longtime activists for Emang Basadi. She held a number of portfolios in the organisation and was at one point its publicity secretary. Her position has always been that women in Botswana faced legal, cultural and institutional constraints in their quest for equality (Setshwaelo 1991). She has served in various capacities in the broader women’s rights environment including being a board member for Gender Links that promotes gender equality and justice across the 15 countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). She has also been a board member for Botswana Substance Abuse Support Network (BOSASnet). While being at the forefront of ‘formal’ or ‘organised’ activism. Setshwaelo makes a strong

¹⁰ Heteronormativity is based on the belief that heterosexuality is the ‘normal’ and preferred sexual orientation.

case against the discourse that outside the formal women's rights organisations to more agentic and often personally driven and branded engagements with patriarchy.

While she still plays an important role in efforts to 'revive' the political and formally organised women's movement, MmaSetshwaelo, as she is commonly known, has used mass media, and especially radio, to create an audience for her services and views that has found a lot more traction than her original gender activist stance. As a guidance counsellor and wellness expert, she provides grief counselling as well as relationship and marriage counselling. Her clients extend across both genders and across age groups. At one point she had a very popular weekly call in radio show, addressing a variety of relationships issues, and a majority of the callers were men, and often found her counselling very helpful. Setshwaelo has diversified her focus from only being about addressing the legal and political constraints to ending gender inequality and addressing gender-based violence, to also being about wellness and healing. At the 2018 annual Business Botswana Women's Power High Tea, she advised women to find a balance, and was reported saying 'you can be assertive without being aggressive, that is putting your point across, fighting a good fight and coming out strong' (*Botswana Daily News* 2018).

The 'Girl Child' Empowerment Champion: Elsie Alexander

Elsie Alexander is another voice that started early with the women's rights agenda, initially working for the Botswana government. Alexander's gender equality discourse is policy analysis and reform. She also has a keen interest in the rights of the girl-child. Alexander was instrumental in operationalising the recommendation of the 1975 Mexico women's conference and served in the two pivotal government bodies -- notably the 1981 inter-ministerial Women and Development Planning and Advisory Committee (WODPLAC) and the Women's Affairs Unit that was established in the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs (Bauer 2011). From the late 1970s to date, Alexander has never stopped talking about gender equality. Now a retired rural sociologist at the University of Botswana, Alexander's gender equality work has transcends all feminisms in Botswana. Her portfolio includes among others working with the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Emang Basadi, the Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), and Gender Links. In addition, she is a party politician who was given a portfolio in the shadow cabinet of the Botswana Congress Party (BCP) for the 2014 general elections -- as special nominee and Minister for Home Affairs, Gender Development and Culture, if the BCP had won the elections.

Alexander's central concern for the last twenty years has been on the women's movement and the status of the girl-child. Her concerns about re-invigorating the Botswana women's movement are translated into action. Rather than giving up, she has instead, just like MmaSetshwaelo, diversified both her target audience and advocacy platforms, but constantly working in partnership with a plethora of emerging young women's empowerment initiatives under the auspices of the organisation *Putting Women First*. She has a popular weekly programme on local youth radio GABZFM where she discusses topical gender issues. In February 2019, a young woman from Botswana, Kagiso Madibana, named Alexander among her sources of inspiration. Madibana is a Chevening alumni who was one of just four featured on the Global Chevening Impact Report out of 50,000 alumni (Mlilo 2019). Her interest in the youth has kept her relevant among the youth, especially young women.

High Teas and 'Grabbing Destiny Against All Odds' Discourse

Although it has a much longer history, the 'grabbing destiny against all odds', sometimes referred to as the 'self-empowerment feminism' is akin to the recent *Lean In* movement launched by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg.¹¹ The central message of the kind of empowerment initiatives we put in this category seem to take as a basic assumption that young women, although undeniably faced with relative powerlessness vis-à-vis patriarchy, must invest in themselves to thrive in spite of it. The target market is

young professional women, hence ‘corporate’ packages are often available to make it possible for their employers to buy a table.

In the context of Botswana with high numbers of unemployed graduates, especially young women, it does not come as a surprise that this kind of discourse has found relevance. The typical imagery in this type of ‘self-empowerment’ movement is a successful ‘self-made’ black and young corporate or business icon. Instead of pursuing political leadership, young women are persuaded that they can make a mark in business.

With roots in British royal etiquette and internationally popularised by the influential American talk-show host, Oprah Winfrey, high teas became very popular in Botswana in the early 2010s. The central pull factor to high teas is the power of association, where women are sold tickets to spend time and or listen to women who have made it. Although they vary depending on the organisers, when compared to the ‘grabbing destiny against all odds’ variety, high teas seem to carry an underlying assumption that the guest has somewhat arrived into urban ‘high society’, with all its trimmings; success, money, position and ambition, hence their deserving of high end confectionery, wine, tea, and sometimes spa treatments. They mark having ‘arrived’, and having successfully become ‘self-empowered’, rather than still trying to beat the odds. Invariably at the high teas, the motivational speakers are not just fellow ‘survivors’, but women who represent the epitome of having made it.

High teas provide space for the women to busk in each other’s glory and to network. Often the ticket takings are earmarked for a ‘worthy cause’ to help the needy. The high teas are dress up events, often organised in summer to make it easier for the guests to wear fancy summer dresses and hats. Although most end up being once off events, there are a number of high teas that have established a more permanent place in the urban middle class women’s social calendars; the longest existing high tea event being the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) Women’s Club’s formed in 1982. The 2010 high tea had South African’s renowned businesswoman, Nomahlubi Simamane speaking about ‘Developing your personal branding’, and the dress code was ‘seasonally floral’. Apparently, the women turned up in their flowery and bright coloured outfits (*Sunday Standard* 2019)

Another highly placed high tea is the annual Business Botswana Women’s Power High Tea which brings women across different career fields. The May 2018 event which was hailed to have been highly successful was held under the theme ‘*Be Empowered. Be a Rare Gem*’. The invited guest speaker, Thabo Mhlanga -a mentor, life coach, personal development strategist was reported in local newspapers making this very interesting remark that ‘There are men in the society that we live in that are intimidated by successful and determined women, and it boils down to even become a challenge to them because they do not know how to handle these women’ (Dikuelo 2018). The implication is that women’s success challenges men’s control.

Inner Peace Women Empowerment Discourse: ‘Get in Touch With the Inner Person’.

Related but not necessarily linked to the faith-based women empowerment discourse has been the rise of the spirituality of inner peace discourse. At the heart of the inner peace women empowerment discourse is a realisation that women undergo gender-based violence, and that many have internalised such oppression in debilitating ways. One inner peace self-empowerment space that has grown very popular is led by a John Maxwell certified trainer, and founder of Leadership Nurturing company, and Hannah Lecha, a survivor of sexual violence. Lecha has gone public about the fact that she was sexually abused by a close relative when she was just 12 years old, and that even though she tried to tell close family members about the

11 *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* is a 2013 book written by Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, and Nell Scovell, Television and magazine writer.

incident, she was dismissed and ignored. She was forced to watch in silence as more children fell victim to her abuser but decided at a later stage in life to confront and address her inner pain (Kgosikebatho 2018). After Lecha obtained professional help, she embarked on activism aimed at assisting especially women to achieve transformation through inner healing.

Lecha has several monthly or on appointment services that aim at assisting participants to find inner peace and work through activities like vision boards to manifest their inner and authentic aspirations. In her own words, she explains that ‘Tea with Hannah’ is a monthly event that offers attendees an opportunity to interact, connect, learn and receive coaching from me in a relaxed setting’. She also says that she ‘helps high-achievers, professionals and entrepreneurs to move past their fears and self-limiting beliefs to achieve their personal and professional goals’. In her work, she has come to discover that many women in Botswana have not dealt with their experiences of gender-based violence. While Lecha does not draw from a cultural or overtly feminist frame she nonetheless takes on one of the biggest challenges towards gender equality; gender-based violence. She approaches it as a problem that can be addressed through obtaining a certain skills-set and serves as the Botswana representative of John Marshall international group of life coaches. She is by no means the only one. There are many others, including Didi Bjorn who founded AfroBotho, which offers youth-led advocacy and emotional wellness services for individuals and corporates, working around the concept of empowerment. In this way, far from remaining victims of patriarchal violence, the women become survivors and are able to confront patriarchy and re-write their narrative and that of others.

Cyberspace and the Empowerment Discourse: Hashtags and Botswana Women’s Movement

#IShallNotForget

According to social media Statistics provided by Statcounter Global Stats, in January 2019, Facebook was the most popular social media platform at 60%, followed by Pinterest at 30%, while Twitter and YouTube were at about 5% (Statscounter 2019). No platform other than Facebook displays the continuities and discontinuities between the different forms of gender activism in Botswana. This is also the space that has widely been used to either market various ‘empowerment’ initiatives or to display the state of being empowered and occupying *My Voice, My Space, My Power*. In the cyberspace, young women particularly have come forward to voice their experiences, to fight for social justice and stage such large campaigns as has never been witnessed since liberation struggles in Southern Africa; assertively, fearfully, alone or with support from the older generation of feminist and some men. The first social media campaign that brought forward the similarities and differences between the approaches started in early May 2016.

It was around a screen shot of an alleged conversation between two politicians over a sexual relationship between one of them and a student that was barely 17 years old at the time. She had become pregnant and the alleged perpetrator sought advice on how to prevent the matter from reaching the media, which he was worried could ruin his political career. The screen shots were apparently shared by a niece to the alleged perpetrator herself who had been his victim and had become distressed with him getting away with sexually abusing minors. It went viral on Facebook. In the alleged conversation, the other politician who was a friend and also a government cabinet minister had apparently advised the alleged perpetrator that even if people got to find out, Botswana tended to forget easily. In a very short space of time, people from across the country were talking about the screen shot conversation, sharing it and expressing shock and disgust in all media platforms. It was shared even faster on Facebook, *#IShallNotForget*.

On 7 May 2016, Tumie Mohoasa wrote on Facebook that: ‘*#IShallNotForget*, I plan NOT to forget!!!! I AM an activist, a lobbyist and most importantly a mother to girls and an aunt to nieces and maybe *re Na le tlalanyana ko lwapeng* [we are not well-off] and one of my kin will not see past the food hampers!!! We hashtagged all the way to kingdom come *#BRINGBACKOURGIRLS*. WHAT DO WE HASHTAG THIS ONE AND GO BEYOND JUST THE HASHTAG (sic)’. She called a meeting for the

next day, and soon after, the hashtag she had proposed, #Ishallnotforget' was very quickly adopted and popularised by a number of young people with a good following on Facebook such as Setho Poloko Motsei Mongatane, Lembie Mmereki, and Lesego Nchunga, and Obakeng Matlou, calling themselves 'Balwantwa', ('the fighters'). The first hashtag 'movement' in Botswana was born and a Facebook page created, named 'Women and Men against all SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN (Women and Men against all sexual abuse of children 2016). It ultimately attracted a whopping 27,495 members. While people across the country shared the sentiment that something needed to be done, from the outset, there were differences in opinion about the appropriate mobilisation strategy.

A certain Gilbert Fahrenheit Buang warned the initiators of the first meeting to 'Be careful of Illegal Gathering' and asked if they had sought a permit for what seemed to be going to be a massive gathering, to which Obakeng Matlou replied, 'join and worry about those later'. Initially, there was an attempt to seek the permission from the police, that was granted, and some people were arrested for illegal protests. Several organisations sprang to the call including the Botswana Network on Ethics, HIV and AIDS (BONELA). Different political parties published press statements. Local musicians such as Kearoma Rantao, Nono Siile and even comedian Juju Sekolokwane pledged their support for the 'movement'. Many women mustered the courage to share their own stories of sexual abuse on the Facebook page (Loeto 2016). Radio stations, especially *Breakfast with Reg* on Gabs FM brought in the 'movement' leaders to address the nation country wide.

Various voices from the older generation of the women's movement marched and spoke on social media, radio, and even at the marches organised around the country. That first week, a certain individual posted on the Facebook page, 'I'm a feminist, I'm a mother, I'm a sister, I'm an aunt, #IShallNotForget'. Even the then Minister of Education, and gender activist and high court judge Unity Dow joined the march in her personal capacity, and while some people took issue with her role, because they argued it was her ministry that failed to protect school-going girls, she had nonetheless made her support of the movement. Facebook and Twitter activism met political feminism and the outcome was a united voice against sexual abuse of children. The success of #Ishallnotforget as a social movement is its lasting impact on policy towards better protection of women and children against sexual violence. It intensified the calls for increasing the age of sexual consent to 18, and implementation of the Botswana 2009 Children Act. The movement activists, although with much less on the ground organising, continue to put up statements on the page about other cases of gender based violence.

#IwearwhatIwant

Two years following #Ishallnotforget, it became very clear that the fight against sexual abuse of women and children still had a long way to go. Among other things such as growing rates of intimate partner homicides and rape, another incident caused a public stir. Exactly a year after the alleged sexual abuse of a girl who had barely reached the age of sexual consent, in May 2017 a young woman was stripped of her clothes at the Gaborone bus station. The video of a mob of young men calling out obscenities and pulling up her dress while some women threw in some mean comments at her went viral. Some of the same activists that participated in #Ishallnotforget and new others started a campaign that came to be known as #IwearwhatIwant. It also attracted a large following of 26,501.

In a similar fashion to the older campaign, a Facebook page was created called the [Right To Wear What We Want](#) (Right to Wear What We Want 2017). Women and men of all ages organised and obtained permission to walk to the bus station in protest, wearing what they wanted (Figure 1). Several other campaigns were staged across the country.

Figure 1: Activists and volunteers marching at the Gaborone bus station



Source: Photograph by Tlhalefang Charles (Mmegi Online 2017)

Some young women came wearing very skimpy clothes to make the point that what one wears should never be a licence to sexually abuse them. After inscribing the slogan on her tummy at the march, the picture of one of the young women, TJ Moyo became the centre of the debate about dress, morality and choice.

Although the campaign did not lead to any steps being taken to prevent such occurrences in the future, the movement opened up debate about dress and rape. Conservatives, moralists, traditionalists and choice-based discourses were presented and debated. Importantly, in their varied positions about decency and choice, the Facebook activists condemned the incidents. Previously, incidents like this one created copycat incidents in other parts, but a year and a half after the incident, no similar occurrence has been reported. The conversation about dress still continues, but the point that dress cannot be used as justification for rape has been made.

Conclusion

It is apparent that notions around gender equality and empowerment within the women's rights space have often failed to capture the different positionalities of the women in Botswana, often pushing exclusionary heteronormative agendas. While not necessarily being labelled as 'feminist', there are intergenerational connections and disconnections in the discourses around gender equality. The inclusion of other ways of being woman, such as being a spiritual, sexual, young, and empowered opens up new conversations around the meaning of women's collective action.

Twenty-five years after the Beijing Platform of action, we need to look beyond obsession with measurable 'impacts' that had come to be the sole yardstick of what counted as feminist and what did not. This entails listening to other ways of 'talking' to avoid the current dismissive approach towards the personal as having little or no political impact.

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