

## **Emergent online discourses and the (re)framing of women's identity: A feminist critical analysis of selected Zimbabwean blogs**

### **ABSTRACT**

The advent of social media communication platforms, specifically blogs as sites of political engagement, means that they now constitute the key carriers of democratic public discourse. Previously marginalised groups such as women can now deliberate, interpret and re-frame their own narratives and identities. This article examines how Zimbabwean women are using blogs to resist and subvert women's ascribed identities, improve the political, economic and cultural representations of women, and enhance women's participation in politics. Using feminist critical theory, the article describes how women-owned content from selected Zimbabwean blogs frames women's political, economic and cultural identities, and how women producing their own messages are improving women's representation in society. Data obtained through qualitative content analysis of blog posts reveal that, as sites of agency, blogs offer possibilities for re-framing and re-presenting women's political and cultural identities. Blogs act as sites for the subversion of ascribed identities that continue to position women as second-class citizens. The article concludes that digital media, particularly blogs, can be used as sites of resistance to power by bringing to the fore counter narratives that have been obscured from mainstream discourse, and at the same time affording women direct influence over their public image.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Feminism has over the years focused on the problem of women as objects, specifically the stereotypical representations of women by the media generally, which restricts them to private roles (Tripp, 2001:152–153) and marginalises them from mainstream public discourses. This pattern of discrediting women permeates all spheres of society in political, economic and socio-cultural institutions. Evidence from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2015) confirms that public discourse is still a male domain. GMMP (2015) reveals that women are underrepresented in news coverage in contrast to men, and that women's voices are largely absent compared to men's perspectives. Therefore, the way gender is represented in the media does have an influence on how we perceive women and men and their public identities.

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*Sibongile Mpofu is a research fellow at Stellenbosch University and Journalism lecturer at the National University of Science and Technology, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She has successfully completed her PhD in Journalism at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and this paper is part of her thesis on women and deliberative democracy online, conducted from 2015 to 2017. Her research interests include new media technologies and activism, political participation and democratic renewal, feminism, as well as gender and intersectionality.*

Carroll and Hackett (2006:83) have also extensively critiqued the democratic deficits inherent in corporate-dominated and highly commercialised media systems. These authors have pointed to the inequalities of access, representation and political ideological power, and its economic and structural integration, as some of the impediments to an inclusive society in which every citizen participates in public policy making.

Therefore, as Elam (1994) suggests, the few instances where women have been positioned as subjects have been cause for celebration for feminism. However, scholars such as Derrida (1989) warn that the achievement of definitive subjectivity, while it seems to offer agency, is not solely liberatory. In other words, there is sufficient ground for feminist research to pay more attention to the contexts and different circumstances under which women, as subjects, use their agential power to re-frame themselves to attain specific public identities. These representations by women, arguably, enable them to reclaim their positions in political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. This is critical, more so with the advent of new communication spaces online that offer possibilities for the previously marginalised, such as women, to re-frame their own narratives and shape their public identities. New media therefore distort the balance of power that existed until now between the mass media and politics, and research from internet studies in the past few years reveals evidence of the mediation of gender politics in unexpected ways (for example, Hussain and Howard, 2012; Mpofu, 2018), and that new media platforms have become sites for political conversations and subsequently, political participation (for example, Mpofu & Rabe, 2017). To comprehend how women are re-framing and re-presenting their identities on new media platforms, it is imperative to analyse these re-presentations and frames in the context of their linkages to the political, economic and socio-cultural environment to which the women are subjected as these conditions influence and dictate the way and the manner in which women's positioning in society is buttressed.

## **1. FRAMING**

Culture and patriarchy are important considerations to contextualise Zimbabwean women's political and socio-economic statuses, and their grievances about these. The United Nations Women (UN Women) (2015: 51) reminds us that despite the gains of independence and the implementation of gender-equal laws by most African states, power inequalities between women and men, as well as gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms, are deeply embedded.

In Zimbabwe, women continuously fight against cultural injustices and seek recognition of their full rights as citizens. Gaidzanwa (2004) and Gudhlanga (2013), argue that the oppression of Zimbabwean women, which has continued up to the present, has resulted in them suffering a double yoke of oppression and marginalisation, from both state tyranny and patriarchy. Nkiwane (2000: 328) concurs, arguing that, while the African woman "is now enlightened and is aware" of her rights to fight against her domination, the power of patriarchy and culture in Africa still compels the African woman to "listen but not to hear". Rather, women, according to expectations from African culture and patriarchy, should not question male authority. Thus, culture and patriarchy continue to thwart gender equality by reinforcing stereotypes that restrict women's political participation.

According to Young (2000), there is need for social perspectives, especially the way in which people interpret things and events from within their structural social situations. This alternative, she further argues, is missing from mainstream discourse. It is this article's argument therefore that while women have gained ground in representation in parliaments, and subsequently being in the public sphere, this has not translated to significant participation in public discourse by the majority of women. This is largely because of the frames employed by mainstream media that have erased the realities such as the potential of women in participation in political, economic and cultural spheres. From this premise, because the media are a capitalist tool as argued by Golding and Murdoch (2000), the representations of women have been misrepresentations, often misogynistic and a product of the patriarchal ideology, which continues to favour men and male superiority (Stimson, 1989:14).

The possibilities of the internet – specifically new media platforms as forms of the public sphere supporting the forming of public opinion that can challenge the status quo – have been of significant interest to contemporary feminist research (Dahlgren, 2011:5). Researchers in this field have focused on the use of new media as public spheres (Latour & Weibel, 2005; Dahlgren, 2011), to claim “voice and recognition” (Couldry, 2010), to broaden political participation (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), and for political mobilisation (Fotopoulos, 2014). The argument is that the internet provides an alternative to the prevailing top-down, vertical communication and that there is now immense potential for decentralised networking and discussion, enabling feminist political activism in the process (Carstensen, 2006: 490). New media specifically, now constitute the key carriers of democratic public spheres (Muller, 2014: 1), where social perspectives from marginalised groups can be deliberated upon and interpreted. Furthermore, marginalised groups such as women are able to self-define (Mpofu & Rabe, 2017) and arguably resist and subvert ascribed identities. Through re-framing and re-presentations of their identities, women, particularly in those contexts where the media is state-controlled, are able to dialogue on issues that are pertinent to them.

Framing, as applied in this article refers to the order, logic and structure in which an idea is enclosed, including the choice of language (Lovenduski, 2006). Framing in this article is also equated to representation, taking a cue from Entman (2004). Lovenduski further argues that frames may be more or less contrived and deliberate, but that they affect how we understand phenomena, ideas, people or events. In other words, frames contribute to the meaning that is conveyed in any particular text, and it is therefore critical to decipher how these are being employed by women in their generated content online.

## **2. FEMINIST CRITICAL THEORY**

This article is premised on the feminist critical theory – a paradigm that derives its approach from critical theory. Critical theorising, as a general term, means theories that are critical of capitalism and domination (Fuchs, 2009). The theory emerged from the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and is concerned with the complex set of mediations that interconnect consciousness and society, culture and economy, and state and citizens. Critical theory is concerned with issues of power and injustice and the ways that economics, politics and culture are closely intertwined to

construct a social system (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005:306). Similarly, Meyer-Emerick (2004:2) posits that critical theory is concerned with people's domination by a false consciousness created and perpetuated by capitalism in order to preserve the hegemony of those in power. It is in this preoccupation with emancipation that critical theory resonates with feminism. Feminism therefore adds the problem of the subject to the social dimension of critical theory. In other words, feminist critical theory is concerned with the status of women and seeks to subvert the prevailing values and excesses of a capitalist society to create a just society.

Thus, for feminists, understanding the ways one is oppressed enables one to take action to change the oppressive forces. Such oppressive forces include the media, communication, culture and technology (Fuchs, 2009), which arguably play an important role in capitalism – leading to feminist critical theory becoming vital in contemporary critical theory. From this premise, the feminist critical theory of media, which I adopt in this article, draws on elements of Marxism because it is relevant to women's experience. This approach also explores whether new media, particularly blogs enable women to resist ascribed identities by re-framing and re-presenting their identities. This approach is relevant because it considers inequality as a symptom rather than a cause (Fuchs, 2009: 204), and directs the focus to understanding oppression, of which the root cause, as argued by Fuchs, can only be diagnosed in the context of power relations between the sexes in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

I use the feminist critical theory to understand the context of online activism on women's issues by both Zimbabwean women and men, and also to assess how the bloggers are utilising blog spaces to counter mainstream narratives and re-frame women's identities. One important aspect that distinguishes critical theory generally is its insistence that analytical concepts are formulated not in an abstract manner, as if they are unaffected by historical change. Rather, critical theory dictates that theoretical ideas are judged to have value only in terms of their applicability to the real world (Tyson, 2006:54). This is why feminist critical theorists, seeking to understand gender relations in different contexts, continuously analyse and critique the basic social structures that maintain oppression and create voicelessness, invisibility, and marginalisation.

Feminist critical theory, as applied in this study, captures the complexities involved in new media use by Zimbabwean women and men. Such complexities as gender, class and other historical problems of domination and social struggles provide us with a nuanced understanding of new media use for self-presentation by marginalised groups such as women.

Thus, understanding these complexities is in line with Marxism, namely that neither human events (in the case of this study, personal and institutional blogging), nor human productions (blogs) can be understood without understanding the specific material and historical circumstances in which these events and productions occur. From the journalism point of view, feminist critical theory enables one to query whether the media, particularly new media have the ability to empower, and to engage marginalised people in the rethinking of their socio-political role.

Fuchs (2009) builds on Marxist writings and the Frankfurt School theories to explain the issues of information capitalism and the immanence of digital media. He argues that there is need to

analyse communication, media, culture and technology in the context of domination, asymmetrical power relations, exploitation, oppression and control. Relevant in this study is the need to analyse Zimbabwe's political, economic and socio-cultural spheres, including the media to determine online communicative sites such as blogs are enabling women to represent themselves and in the process subvert ascribed identities.

The concern about media is that, in a capitalist economic system, media production has been increasingly commandeered by large corporations and moulded to their interests and strategies (Golding & Murdock, 2000; Freedman, 2014). Thus, a critical approach to communication generally, and to media specifically, is important largely because it assumes that social relations of communication are inseparable from the social relations of power (Good, 1989: 53). Hence, having power in or control over the media is argued to affect the capacity to determine or influence the contents of the media.

In addition, under capitalism, media institutions are intimately connected to what Freedman (2014: 119) terms "networks of prestige and power", and their outputs are, not surprisingly, associated with a hegemonic project designed to legitimise elite frames and assumptions. Freedman (2014) further argues that powerful interests deploy a range of institutions and instruments, the media central among them, to naturalise their views of the world and to inculcate a common sense of that naturalised view of the world. Therefore, the advent of new media, with possibilities of less gate-keeping and therefore newer frames, brings a sense of optimism to the feminist project.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study that employed the case study research design, particularly the collective case study method to address the research question. The choice of collective cases is supported by Du Plooy (1995), Mark (1996), and Babbie (2010), who argue that a collective case study provides insight into an issue. Babbie (2010: 309) posits that, while there is no consensus on what constitutes a "case", the term is generally used to refer to an event, a programme, an activity, a process or one or more individuals, usually bounded by parameters such as time and activity (Creswell, 2003). In this study, five cases (websites) were selected. These are: [www.wcoz.org](http://www.wcoz.org), [www.kubatana.net](http://www.kubatana.net), [www.herzimbabwe.co.zw](http://www.herzimbabwe.co.zw), [www.herald.co.zw](http://www.herald.co.zw) and [www.chronicle.co.zw](http://www.chronicle.co.zw).

The first three are women's organisation websites and were selected based on their dedication to political activism and women's empowerment. The first two websites are not necessarily feminist when compared to [herZimbabwe.com](http://www.herzimbabwe.com), which has since folded, but its focus on women and women's issues led to their selection. However, because these are different organisations, different search criteria were used. [Wcoz.org](http://www.wcoz.org) was purposively selected using two search strategies on Google. The first search used "women's movement in Zimbabwe", and Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe came up top of the results list. A second search phrase, "politics and women's movement in Zimbabwe", was used to test the earlier search. The results of these two searches were similar. The next two websites, [Kubatana \(www.kubatana.net\)](http://www.kubatana.net) and [herZimbabwe \(www.herzimbabwe.co.zw\)](http://www.herzimbabwe.co.zw), were also purposively selected, using three search strategies on

Google. The first search phrase used was “top Zimbabwe feminist blogs”, and “top Zimbabwean activist blogs”. The last search, using the same phrase, was conducted on the website of a local technology firm, Techzim, which aggregates websites in Zimbabwe.

The latter two sites are newspaper websites, namely: *The Herald*, a national daily newspaper that is read by 17% of the urban population, according to ZAMPS (2018) Second Half Report, and the *Chronicle*, a regional daily newspaper with a readership of 7% of the urban population. For the two news media websites, *The Herald* ([www.herald.co.zw](http://www.herald.co.zw)) and the *Chronicle* ([www.chronicle.co.zw](http://www.chronicle.co.zw)), a different search strategy was employed. I drew up a list of all the media in Zimbabwe and visited their online editions to assess whether they have blog platforms. Drawing up a list of Zimbabwean media was not difficult, as the range is fairly small, and I used the Zimbabwe Media Commission's (2015) list of media in Zimbabwe to reduce bias by ascertaining that no media house was left out in this assessment. While three media houses, *The Herald*, the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay's* “AMH Voices”, were found to have blog pages during the period under study, this study found the first two media houses' blog pages relevant to this study as they contained journalistic blogs that the research sought to integrate in the analysis. The blogs are written by different bloggers, both female and male. The selected news media organisations are state-owned, and, ideologically, their content is aligned to the interest of those in power and the state. Relevant to this study was then to integrate how such blogs allow counter hegemonic content to filter through. Content in the two newspapers' blogging platforms was found to be relevant to answer the research questions.

This study focused on content published from the period 1 January 2013, six months before the July 31 Zimbabwe Presidential and Parliamentary elections, and six months afterwards, to 31 January 2014. The pre-election period is particularly interesting because this is when there was an increase in online communication initiatives as different groups campaigned for issue representation. The six months post-election period is also significant, as different groups continued to campaign for issues and candidates for ministerial and government positions.

Data was analysed through qualitative content analysis using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool, ATLAS.ti. Qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring (2000), is a systematic, theory-guided approach to text analysis using a category system. This theory-guided approach enables a deeper analysis of texts than mere description. In addition, qualitative content analysis offers two unique qualities: the first being that data are pre-existing and thus naturalistic, and the second that data are non-interactive and hence have a built-in level of authenticity (Reinharz, 1992:147). These characteristics enable a rich description of the texts.

As part of qualitative content analysis, this study employed narrative and interpretive analyses, the emphasis of which was on meaning produced by the structure of the text and choice of words used in the blogs, and gaining insights into the bloggers' interpretation of their social worlds, as also described by Babbie and Mouton (2001:28). This perspective posits that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspective of those enmeshed within it (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011:17). Since texts are not produced within a vacuum but are products of a given time and space, cultural norms and values that guide aspects of social life (Hesse-Biber & Leavy,

2007: 229), they offer a deeper understanding of the realities of the people studied. Therefore, this enables us discern the kind of frames used in the posts.

To apply qualitative content analysis, the blogs were initially coded. Blogs contain multimedia objects such as photographs, audio and video. For this study, however, only texts in the blogs were coded. Coding entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance or that appear to be salient within the social worlds of those studied (Bryman, 2012:568). Similarly, Saldana (2008:3) defines a code as “a word, a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of data”. Therefore, a code represents and captures the datum’s primary content and essence (Saldana, 2009:3). For the entire thesis, six themes were identified through literature, and these are *participation, deliberative democracy, public sphere, empowerment, representation and challenges*. However, for this analysis, the study extracted data from one theme: representation. In coding the blogs, I employed Miles and Huberman’s (1994:57) descriptive, interpretive and pattern coding, in which chunks of texts were broken down, first into descriptive elements or basic themes, after which these elements were closely examined and compared for similarities. Descriptive coding entailed searching for meanings in texts and the kinds of language and frames used, and labelling these. I used both open and *in vivo* coding. The former was used to summarise the primary topic of the datum, and the latter to extract verbatim codes from the texts.

With regards to sampling of the blogs, WCoZ’s online discussion forum on <https://www.facebook.com/theWCoZ> therefore was purposively selected, as the forum serves as the mouthpiece for lobbying and the dissemination of information on politics, gender, women’s issues and general human rights issues (WCoZ, 2015). The researcher worked through all the 64 blog posts by WCoZ during the year 2013. The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discard (1) blogs that just offered a link to a media article without commenting on the issue and (2) blogs that were event announcements. This resulted in 32 blogs left in the sample. The researcher then went through all 32 blogs and selected ten that exhibited opinions on issues by the organisation and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

On the Kubatana website, the researcher purposively selected the category “Women’s issues”, on which 34 blogs were posted in 2013. The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discount (1) job vacancies and (2) blogs that were event announcements. Blogs that fell into the two categories were thus not included. This resulted in 16 blogs in the sample. To select the ten blogs I went through the remaining blogs and selected those that exhibited viewpoints and opinions on issues by the bloggers, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion. On HerZimbabwe ([www.herzimbabwe.co.zw](http://www.herzimbabwe.co.zw)), I used the navigation panel “Her News”, which led to the category “Politics and Rights”. In addition, following the study’s aim I also navigated another panel, “Her Views”, and subsequently was led to the same category, “Politics and Rights”, with 64 blogs published during the year 2013. The rules that guided sampling on this site were to discard (1) all blogs that were event and news announcements and (2) profiles, obituaries and advertisements. This resulted in 34 blogs in the sample. The researcher then went through these

34 blogs to select ten blogs that exhibited the blogger's viewpoint and opinion on issues, and proffered alternatives or solutions to the problem.

For the two newspapers, I navigated their homepages and observed that the news organisations listed all their bloggers and their areas of specialisation, for example "Gender", "Business", "Features", "Sport". The journalists that blog on these platforms are line editors and senior reporters who are employed by their news organisations. However, there are also other bloggers who are not employed by the news organisations, and they are also part of the sample. There were 81 blogs published in *The Herald*. The criteria used to reduce the number of blogs into manageable units were to discard (1) all blogs that were hard news reports, (2) blogs on relationships, and (3) blogs on profiles. This resulted in 35 blogs in the sample. I then worked through all the remaining blogs and selected ten that exhibited viewpoints and opinions on issues by the bloggers, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion. There were a total of 44 blog posts in the *Chronicle* and using the criteria above, these were then reduced to 14. These were then reduced to 10 blogs that exhibited viewpoints and opinions on issues by the bloggers, and proffered solutions to the problems under discussion.

To discern the transformative possibilities that blogs offer Zimbabwean women to resist and subvert ascribed identities through re-framing and re-presenting their identities, this article is interested in how selected Zimbabwean bloggers represent women's issues in their country, and how they aim to dispel stereotypes of the Zimbabwean woman, including the frames used.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 How Zimbabwean bloggers represent women's issues

In terms of how Zimbabwean bloggers go about representing women's issues, there were 126 references drawn from the data that pertain to *representation of women and women's issues* in the 50 blogs across the five websites. To interpret how the content of the blogs reflects on representation, a sub-theme, *communication strategies*, was derived from the content and three codes – *giving women a voice*, *dispelling stereotypes*, and *presentation of messages* – were used to group related data that emphasised these three areas.

Under the code, *giving women a voice*, the WCoZ blogs highlight the need for increased space for women to engage with the Zimbabwean leadership (blog 2), the need for the appointment of women as cabinet ministers, and advocating for women to be given strategic ministries (blog 5). In addition, blog 9 advocates for the amplification of women's voices and highlights the need for the provision of platforms for co-ordinated and collective responses by women to strategise, plan and respond to issues. Furthermore, project implementation is identified as one of the methods of giving women a voice as well as participation in decision making (blog 4).



Blog citation 2:11 highlights that enabling women to engage with leadership enhances their participation in decisions that are implemented, and facilitates an understanding, by those in leadership, of the issues affecting and of interest to women. Blog citation 5:5 suggests that the appointment of women into cabinet facilitates women's voices in the implementation of the country's policies.

The Kubatana blogs highlight that there is need to expose women to activist content in various media and to examples of women's activism (blogs 12 & 15), to share stories by women (blog 18), reporting on women's events and discussions (blog 17), and holding workshops for women and men (blog 14). In addition, the blogs highlight that mobilising women to contest the elections seeks to give women a voice (blog 13), and lastly, by allowing women a voice, the blogs enable women to use their agency to determine the course of their lives (blog 20). Blog citations 12:9 and 15:8 posit that creating awareness by exposing women to examples of activism, using other media such as films, serves as an inspiration for and realisation of women's potential to solve their problems. In addition, sharing stories creates solidarity and support, thereby enriching lives (18:7).

The HerZimbabwe blogs reveal that to give women a voice, there is need to give a voice to men too (blog 27). There is also need to share and publish women's stories, personal experiences and observations (blog 28), and project the experiences of those women who are unable tell their stories (blog 25). In blog citation 27:9, the writer highlights that giving men a voice through having forums and platforms and sharing the content of these discussions enhance the understanding of women's issues, and helps women and men to share their lived experiences. In addition, sharing and publishing individual women's experiences and stories facilitates an understanding of women's issues and assists in countering misinformation (blogs 28:1 & 28:4). In blog 25, the writer posits that there are some women who want to join the conversations, but that they have too "small" a voice or cannot overcome the patriarchal dynamics that tend to dominate such platforms (blogs 25:36;3).

*The Herald* blogs emphasise the need to promote inter-generational dialogues amongst women, assisting women to reclaim their traditional power (blog 40), and promoting equal representation of women and men in the political, economic and cultural spheres (blogs 35 & 36). Similarly, the *Chronicle* blogs highlight the need for equal representation of women and men in politics and the need for programmes that empower women with knowledge and mobilise them so that they participate more in elections (blog 44), and by sharing women's stories (blog 46). In addition, the blogs give women a voice by educating women on sexual abuse and advocating for the creation of a safe environment for victims of abuse (blog 49). Blog citation 44:13 posits that attaining gender equality will enhance the participation of women in politics. Furthermore, in citation 44:14, the writer posits that implementing programmes targeting women facilitates awareness and helps mobilise women to participate in elections. Sharing women's stories therefore gives women a voice to narrate and share their experiences (blog 46:11).

#### **4.2 Resisting stereotypes through blogging**

In terms of how bloggers seek to dispel stereotypes of Zimbabwean woman, including the frames they use, the majority of the blogs, including the news media blogs, employ positive frames in describing the Zimbabwean woman. For example, blogs from WCoZ dispel stereotypes by identifying Zimbabwean women as capable of being leaders (blog 5), special, powerful and spiritual (blog 6), and fighters (blog 7). In blog citation 7:12, the writer posits that Zimbabwean women have continued to fight for their human rights despite the deliberate backlash to restrict them to the household and traditional roles.

In addition, women project themselves as special because they are “God’s latest creation”, and that they were given the power of creation by carrying and giving birth to human beings (blog 6:17:1-2). In blog citation 6:9 there is an attempt by the writer to dispel stereotypes of women’s position in society by using the Bible to support the need for equality. For example, the writer argues: “[S]he insisted that the bible [sic] asks women to love their husbands wholeheartedly and does not ask the same of the men” (blog 6:12:1).

The writer adds:

This is wrong[,] as in the various sections of the bible [sic] the men are given the responsibility to work for the family and to love their wives unconditionally. In Ephesians 5:25 it says “husbands love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it ... so ought man to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself”. This is a powerful instruction on the men to love their wives and put them in a very high place (blog 6:13:1).

The writer’s argument here is that women need to be positioned equally with men and that men need to respect and love their wives, as the Bible demands. Blog 5 uses another positive frame, where the writer argues that Zimbabwean women are capable of leadership and that is why they deserve to be in cabinet. The writer illustrates this by mentioning women politicians who have served in various political ministries (blog 5:3:1).

Further, Zimbabwean women re-present themselves as moving beyond the silencing of their voices and ownership of their bodies to claim what is right for them (blog 14). In blog citation 14:5, the writer argues that women are now speaking of the value of mothering, community, loyalty and love, and the limitations of victimhood. This, according to the blog, has enabled women to walk with respect and dignity. Again here, there is the positive framing and accentuation of womanhood that the bloggers embrace in these self-definitions.

In addition, blog 20 posits that Zimbabwean women need to tell their story and re-frame their narratives because failure to do so results in people who will gaze at Zimbabwean women with “rose-tinted lenses” (blog 20:9:1). According to the writer, the lived experiences of women, such as enduring sleepless nights waiting to collect water, spending hours queuing

at the country's borders to buy groceries in neighbouring countries, and queuing at banks to withdraw a set daily amount of money that "devalues while they queue", need to be told by the Zimbabwean women.

Other blogs dispel stereotypes by identifying a "new" Zimbabwean woman who is undeterred by convention and conformity; the woman who goes for what she wants, and when she wants it (blog 23). In addition, women are identified as leaders with the capacity to hold key and top positions (blogs 29 & 30). Citations 29:4 and 30:1 reveal women's capabilities that are often overlooked. In this way, women are able to facilitate the emergence of a "we" position and make their demands known. The writer posits:

[S]he is the kind of woman we want running things. She is a leader who is seen digging around, helping fix roads or driving a two-tonne truck to deliver sanitary pads to women in rural areas (blog 29:4:2).

Furthermore, blog 26 highlights the need to urge girls to take up science subjects and that there should be an interchange of gender roles in the home. Moreover, blog 27 supports the need for the exchange of roles by questioning gender roles and differences that stereotype women to the advantage of men. The blog further highlights women's successes, and how women have overcome the gender barriers that have traditionally oriented the functional space for women towards the kitchen (blog 27:16). Similarly, blogs in *The Herald* dispel stereotypes by identifying Zimbabwean women as resilient in the most difficult circumstances (blog 32) and as role models for children and society in general (blog 34). In addition, blog 36 identifies femininity as a strength rather than a weakness, and says that women have the power to speak if they want to (blog 38). Blog 39 describes African women as strong and belonging to the original "Mother Earth" (blog 39:17:6).

Blog citation 37:2 dispels the notion of women as commodities to be owned by men by explaining the meaning of lobola. The blog explains the lobola culture using the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, emphasising that the lobola is meant to cement relationships between families. To further highlight the power of women, blog citation 38:10 reveals how the writer's mother stood resolute and defied the culture of wife inheritance. Lastly, in citation 40:10, women are projected as having authority through their non-verbal communication.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Generally, the results across the 50 blog entries from the five blogsites highlight the need for women's engagement at all levels of decision making, including their appointment into cabinet, as well as implementing programmes that empower women to organise and strategise on issues affecting them. Already, a positive frame on women's potential is evident in the meaning conveyed in the texts. The frame further prescribes and advocates for the transformation of social structures that impede women's participation in the political and socio-cultural spheres. In addition, the blogs project women's self-definitions, which are achieved through reconnecting with the past and retelling the stories of women as mothers. Here there is also the positive framing of femininity,

especially motherhood. This is in contrast to the images and perspectives, and identities obtained from mainstream media. Furthermore, these self-definitions enable women to understand that they hold power to change their situation by refuting stereotypes, and projecting womanhood positively. The findings further reveal that sharing women's stories by women, and providing platforms that enable knowledge creation, reinforce the realisation of women's self-existence, which subsequently enables them to use their agency. Another inference is that giving women a voice also entails giving voice to men so that the discourse on women's empowerment and clamour for positive public identity also integrates men, and thus the entire society. This follows a realisation that in patriarchal societies such as Zimbabwe, the integration of men in the fight for women's empowerment and the subversion of women's ascribed identities is critical, if such efforts are to bear fruits.

In addition, what is drawn from the findings is that Zimbabwean women are publishing peculiar, critical and "taboo" issues that are not normally covered by mainstream media, for example, abortion, sex and sexuality, amongst other issues annihilated within traditional media frames. Furthermore, women's issues are presented in a way that calls for social change. This indicates that, through blogging, Zimbabwean women are able to bring to the public space these critical issues that impact on their lives, from their own perspectives, and are thus bifurcating the public and the private spheres, as argued for by Dahlgren (2009). I further proffer that Zimbabwean women are therefore able to identify and locate themselves, both as individuals and collectives, within the pertinent socio-cultural issues obtaining in Zimbabwe. This assertion refutes the critical theory perspective that the media creates voicelessness and invisibility, but rather, this study shows an aspect of online media that enables an understanding of how the public sphere can be influenced by the socio-cultural struggles occurring in private spheres, particularly in contexts where communication is restricted. By contextualising their struggles, women are able to positively identify themselves and become visible in the public sphere.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that, through blogging, Zimbabwean women are able to bring into existence the "village woman", who is projected in the blogs as the epitome of a Zimbabwean woman – distinct, powerful and a hard worker (blog 26). By reflecting on experiences of mothers, to interpret the current political, economic and socio-cultural conditions that Zimbabwean women find themselves in, the bloggers are able to make concrete their experiences, and in the process are constituting these into what the Personal Narratives Group (1989:65) called "new cultural possibilities". In this way, bloggers identify aspects of culture that oppress them, as advocated by feminist critical theory. For example, in blog 26:6, the blogger writes that "civilisation has locked women in a cage", obliterating dialogues between generations, arguing that there is need to (re-) present previous realities in order to interpret the current ones because "the voices of our mothers also speak about our current lives".

What is discerned from the study is that the media are a critical element and conduit of change in the contemporary dynamics of democracy as they are, amongst others, one of the social institutions used to maintain continuity of the status quo. This is achieved through the collective frames of references they foster (Dahlgren, 2009). For feminists, such frames, riding

on culture and patriarchy, have defined femininity in negative and restrictive terms. Thus it is important for feminist critical theorists to understand the potential of any media to transform such frames to accommodate both women and men. In this study, blogs are highlighted as giving an opportunity for the re-presentation of femininity, and specifically womanhood – thus, contrary to the critical theory view that the media is solely an arm of the elite, perpetuating capitalist ideologies (Fiske, 1996), blogs offer possibilities for reform, both from the way individual women perceive themselves and the way society regards women – thus their public identities. Using their lived experiences, specifically personal stories, eye-witness accounts, reflections, research and observations, Zimbabwean bloggers are able to determine and select which attributes to emphasise and project in identifying and describing the Zimbabwean woman and women's issues. These positive frames are used to accentuate the position that Zimbabwean women deserve and the issues in the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres that need to be confronted. Therefore, from a feminist critical theory perspective, despite the gendered nature of the blogosphere (Harp & Tremayne, 2006), as well as other views on the embeddedness of blogs in power structures (Fuchs, 2012), blogs, in the Zimbabwean context, improve the political and socio-cultural identities of Zimbabwean women. Consequently, this, arguably, contributes towards the projection of women's potential, capabilities and power.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This research article concludes that blogs are used as sites for resistance to power by both bloggers and website owners. I argue that blogs present discontent regarding the political, economic and cultural power of men and the subjugation of women in our society, with the key message being that a transformative agenda needs to be embraced by both individuals and society, beginning by recognising women's potential, and subsequently improving their representation and ultimately participation in the public sphere. Further, this article concludes that the bloggers use blogs as sites of expression, self-definitions and re-framing and re-presentations, recording distinct perspectives – and in essence, counter narratives that have been obscured from dominant discourse. The observation, as deciphered from the blogs, that unless there is a transformation of the mindset, first within the self, and at home and wider society, women's identities will remain confined and restricted to the private space. Therefore, as spaces of agency, blogs not only chronicle women's lives, but offer possibilities for self-presentations, and ultimately the subversion of ascribed identities that continue to position women as second-class citizens. This view is synonymous with proponents of feminist critical theory who view dialogues as stimulating "political consciousness" (Thomson, 2014:109), and as bringing issues away from general abstraction into reality.

Furthermore, the study concludes that, from women's everyday conversations, one is able to discern events, occurrences and social conditions external to women that have an effect on their lived experiences. These external influences include political, economic and cultural occurrences. This conclusion is supported by feminist critical theory, which allows for the identification of external influences that subjugate women. In addition, blogs provide alternative entry routes into politics, enabling Zimbabwean women to reclaim their space in the political, socio-economic and cultural spheres by positively framing and projecting their potential.

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