Research Paper   .

RE-IMAGINING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT USING A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST LENS: A ZIMBABWE CASE

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Abstract

Zimbabwe's post- colonial trajectory provides a nuanced way to examine the dynamics of gender relations and toxic masculinity. The chapter explores the interplay of gender equality and women empowerment in and through the national policies on gender as well as the initiatives on the ground. Drawing on a Decolonial feminist lens underscores the need to deconstruct inherited power structure and challenge the negative attributes of patriarchal masculinity which perpetuate gender inequalities. The chapter further explores how colonial legacies continue to shape and reshape gender norms, decision making and leadership in the economy, politics and other public spheres. A Decolonial feminist approach is adopted as this underscores the need to acknowledge and interrogate the impact of , ethnicity, class and power to capture the nuances of gendered oppression which affect women in the Global South. The chapter further explores how grassroots movements, local initiatives and indigenous epistemologies contribute to gender equality and women empowerment, challenge hegemonic structures and harness alternative futures. Using comprehensive literature, document analysis and interviews, the chapter presents case studies which demonstrate   the need to amplify the voices of the marginalized and 'forgotten'. The chapter argues that the inclusion of cultural practices and community owned solutions are key in re-imagining a transformative gender just society to drive the gender equality mandate. The chapter concludes that solidarity building efforts, critical reflections, inclusive dialogues and an adoption of more transformative action lead to a just and equitable re-imagined future Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Decolonial feminist lens, gender equality, women empowerment, community owned solutions

Introduction and background

African women have struggled against a colonial past that preserves patriarchal norms, disenfranchising them from opportunities to create, innovate and organize own initiatives. Gender euality is achieved when women and men, girls and boys have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society. According to Philips (2005) discourse takes a dominant role in the production and normalizing of gender, with individuals adopting as their own the gender Identities that are discursively assigned to them from birth. Colonization of Africa by the western states transformed gender and power relations in complex, diverse and contradictory ways by changing societal structures (Duran and Duran, 1995). Many of the stories that are told about women and men are rooted in western hegemony, which measures gender equality according to western ways of knowing and serves to legitimize neo-colonial forms of domination (Brenner, 2003). The western understanding of gender in the context of modernity is a construct that regards the western ideals we uphold about masculinity and femininity, roles and power relations. Colonization imposed a patriarchal and hierarchical society with a belief on women's inferiority and submissive position in society. This resulted in the emergence of sexual division of labor with women in a subordinate role in society. A wide body of research suggests that women were prohibited from participating in politics, professional and religious institutions. One of the key demands of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was iterating women' s political equality and participation and, making governments and states accountable for their realization.

In McLaren (2017), Alcoff disputes the universalist vision of women and argues for including social, economic, historical and cultural differences as pivotal in who women are, how they are seen and what they are able to become. Sustainable Development Goal 5.5 reiterates the premise to ensure women's full participation at all levels of decision making in economic, political and public life (UN Women,n.d.).

The chapter contributes to enhance and advance Decolonial African feminist and critical voices in gender equality and women empowerment by challenging the prevailing western discourse of gender equality and women empowerment. The chapter seeks to adopt a radical reimagining of social, political and ecosystems to centre voices, experiences and agency on those most marginalized by patriarchy and colonialism. It is widely

recognized that feminist organizing voices which seek to create transformative political change which prioritize well - being and ameliorate and transform structural inequalities that give rise to gender injustice in the first place (Nazneen and Okech, 2021; Piscopo and Och, 2021; Tsikata and Ossome, 2024). Similarly, United Nations states as a rising concern 'not only is the advancement of women's rights and full equality too slow, uneven and far from a global reality, but women's hard-fought achievements now risk being reversed (Villarreal, 2023). For example, Turkey withdrew from Istanbul Convention against gender-based violence, Taliban's ban on women from working (Margolis, 2019). This push-back is coming at a cost as it derails the gains garnered so far in women's empowerment and equality.

Diversity of cultural practices is recognized and the imposition of western norms and values as universal standards for gender are challenged. The mere inclusion of women in political bodies does not necessarily lead to trans-formative changes and often there is reproduction of gender and other inequities which play out in different ways depending on the context and location. For example, LGBQI+ in a Zimbabwean context would be treated differently because of misconceptions. This chapter challenges patriarchal notions of gender justice and advocates for practices that address the root causes of harm, violence and marginalization of women. Policy initiatives which have been implemented to ensure inclusion of women in public sphere include gender quotas. These have had mixed results depending on whether they are reserved seats or voluntary electoral quotas. Global data by UNDP reveals higher levels of political participation by women is associated with lower risk of civil wars, state led violence and violation of political rights (Yeshaneh,2023). Similarly, Tandon, Meertens, Satjja and Ghosh, (2023) suggest women's participation contributes significantly towards the conclusion of peace talks and the implementation and durability of peace agreements.

Care work and unpaid domestic work, the ingrained perception of men as leaders and women as followers, sexual harassment and backlash all constrain women's participation in public decision making at all levels (UNESCAP, 2019). In addition, social, cultural and institutional barriers hamper women's efforts at gender equality and empowerment. This resonates with the assertion made by Dersnah (n.d.) that the deeply embedded traditional gender roles, negative stereotyping, differentially gendered public and private space divide, violence and threat of violence all inhibit women's full and effective participation in the public domain. As premised in the foregoing discussion, there is need to understand the contexts and the factors which shape gender equality and empowerment. The centrality of the reality of the African context and attention to how women's experiences are shaped by the diverse identities that they embody and ultimately inform complex definitions of empowerment and gender equality. are explored in this chapter. To add on, the chapter contributes to the debate by Global South feminists who challenge negative and disempowering, western centric constructions of womanhood among African people (Bawa & Adeniyi Okgunyankin, 2018).

Colonization imposed a patriarchal and hierarchical society with a belief on women's inferiority and submissive position to men. A European understanding of gender was instituted which erased conception of gender before colonial gender systems (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2014, Lugones, 2010). The Western gendered system maintained by the coloniality of gender, permeates patriarchal and Western control over Global South women's identities and their production of knowledge (Lugones, 2010). Coloniality of gender is described as encompassing phenomenon, where all control over sex, authority and labor is organized around it (Lugones, 2008). As victims of colonization women were prohibited from participating in most public domains as leaders. The sexual division of labor subordinated women to men in society. Power control and domination are not embedded in the nation only, but also in relations of gender and sexuality. On a similar note, Ibarra-Colado (2006) argues that coloniality of knowledge is a means of control by detaching those from the Global South from their native condition and capacity for autonomous thought.

Academics in the Global South and the West adopt western epistemologies to the point that they see little value in their own traditions and indigenous knowledge systems by ignoring or reshaping them to become a fit to western theories. Global South scholars are quite aware of the coloniality of knowledge and many acknowledge this but posit that the Western frameworks they use enhance the acceptance and recognition in the international arena. This resonates with the observation made by Ibarra-Colado, (2006:471)

> For one to belong in the international community, one must speak the center's language, use its concepts, discuss its agenda and perform to the stereotype of the 'imperfect South' while keeping 'polite silence' on the real causes of your problems

Existing literature notes that black women in the Global South continue to be denied status as active participants in the transformation of their

communities but rendered passive victims of a range of social ills (Dogra, 2012, Makama; Helman; Titi and Day, 2019, Crenshaw, 1991). However, a narrow focus on the downtrodden role of women fails to account for the myriads of ways in which women counter resistance, express their agency and are complicit with patriarchal structures (Meth, 2016). A colonial past that preserves patriarchal norms has deprived women of their voices to assert their own identity. An African decolonial lens thus expands the critical voices to seek justice, voice and visibility for those affected adversely by the colonial and neocolonial eras. The chapter opens debate on how gender equality is enacted as a western practice outside Eurocentric domain. It questions the meanings of gender equality and empowerment. The understanding of gender empowerment for the woman in the Global South is complex, nuanced and not binary as it is influenced by gendered expectations of behaviour within a given context (Makama, et al, 2019).

Conceptual underpinnings of the study

Decolonial feminism is an emerging theoretical concept led by Lugones, 2008; 2010) that centers decolonial theory in a racial/ gendered feminist context. As a framework, decolonial feminist theory provides space for the silenced voices of women in the Global South to become agents in the production of knowledge and visible part of gender equality discourse. Decolonial feminist theory engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and Global South indigenous identity and gender while providing space for voices and experiences of silenced and 'othered' women (Bhambra, 2014; Lugones, 2010; Paludi, Mills and Mills, 2019). The theory creates space for a feminist discourse that truly reflect and dignifies Global South women's understanding of identity, gender and epistemologies from the lived experiences of their gendered colonial difference. Decolonial feminism critiqued the nature of western knowledge production that focuses on "othering" marginalized groups through designating them as voiceless subjects for investigation through a colonial lens (Mignola, 2007). The theory challenges the dominant structures that have made invisible the agency of Global South women by giving legitimacy to their knowledge and their experience of gender, identity and work.

Lugones, (2007, 190) coined the concept 'decoloniality of gender' drawing on the work of African feminists and anti-colonial feminists. Decolonial feminism highlights the intersection between coloniality, racism, gender and geospatial location and modernity in producing particular kinds of feminism in different contexts of oppression, with a strong focus on justice. Integrating this theoretical lens into gender equality discourse enables us to understand that knowledge is situated. A new framework within knowledge production can be developed as one takes into account the contextual features and lived experiences of the people involved.

While Tamale, (2004) has located feminism in Africa in the continent's historical realities of marginalization, oppression and domination about slavery, racism, colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization. Similarly, Mama (2011) is of the view that African feminism is also concerned with respect, dignity, equality lives free from violence and threat of violence. She adds that African feminism seeks to empower women within political, economic and social freedom. To add on, African feminist activism includes "empowering women through access to resources such as health, education and housing" (Atanga, 2013:308). In African feminism the focus has been on the relationship between women and men, mediated through culture and religion (Atanga, 2013, Lugones, 2008) and less on structural inequalities faced by women (Kiguwa, 2019). From the foregoing discussion, the focus is not only on bringing new conceptions of delineating issues which affect Global South women who have been treated as peripheral by Western feminism but to acknowledge their voice and agency. Feminism in Africa has indirectly maintained a colonial lens (Tamale, 2011; Shefer, 2018) and has been co-opted by patriarchal structures to do the work of imperialism and racism (Brenners, 2018). Hence the thrust is to foster knowledge production steeped in the lived experiences and realities of the women. African feminism is rooted in colonial lens which seeks to unravel how coloniality marginalizes women by silencing their voices.

A growing body of research focuses on women's agency to unveil their experiences and histories as a way to reclaim their womanhood. Under Esof's (2013) notion of she-murenga, the role of women activism in Zimbabwe's struggle for independence and emancipation against violence and the fight for gender equality is explored as a way to re-appropriate womanhood. She -murenga recognizes women's valuable contribution in asserting their political struggle in multiple tongues (Esof, 2013). For Dangarembga, "feminism stands for voice, personal integrity, assertion of self, socially productive uses of the erotic and recognition of the value of women's productive and reproductive labor" (Shaw, 2007 p. 14). This resonates with the aim of African feminism to create knowledge that would facilitate innovative and transformative social change (Tamale, 2011). To further advance this argument, Tamale, (2011, p. 25) posits that,

> "Existing theoretical bases are a starting point and these can be decontextualized,

for example, Foucault's conceptualization of sexuality in terms of power relations (Foucault, 1976) or Butler's implicit theory of heteronormativity and gender performativity (Butler, 1990) can be useful in analyzing sexualities in Africa as long as this is done with the continental specificities in mind and a view to improve them".

To advance the argument further, there is an underlying resonance between Western and African feminisms in that Western feminism provide a theoretical scaffolding which is useful as one reflects on issues that affect African women. However, Helle-Valle (2004, cited in Tamale, 2011) argues that there are certain ideologies and practices unique to Africa, which brings about nuanced differences in issues of gender equality and empowerment. The implication is that Black women's experiences have been presented through the eyes of mainstream white feminism and there is need for an alternative. As a consequence, "nonwestern feminists are especially aware; they have to find their own voice, they have to learn to articulate their differences, not only from their own traditional contexts but also western feminism" (Narayan, 1989 cited in McCann & Kim, 2013 p. 375). In light of this problematic, we are interested in how a decolonial, African-centered feminist lens can shape how we understand gender equality and women empowerment. Such a lens is deemed to address the concerns and challenges of using an approach which brings to the fore the challenges in promotion of African women's voices in decolonizing debates on women empowerment and gender equality.

Research design
To understand the lived experiences of women, the study adopted a qualitative research design. Experiences and meanings generated by people are crucial for researchers to understand their viewpoint which improves the qualitative conception of the phenomenon under study (Daher, Carre, Jaramib, Olivares and Tomici, 2017). The study is qualitative and adopt approaches that emphasize biography, narrative, life and oral history among other qualitative techniques. Transformative research addresses the relationship between structural oppression and lived experiences between the public and personal (Walby, 2005). The study draws on critical feminist methodologies for example critical reflexivity and value of lived experiences. A collaborative approach is adopted for the study where the women participants come together to share experiences/ understandings of women empowerment and gender equality using memory accounts. The study uses visual participatory methodology generally and memory accounts as a

decolonial feminist praxis and research as social change approach to develop a community of 20 Zimbabwean women educators. The voices of 20 women were gathered through narrative memory. A combination of purposive sampling methods was used to select the participants of diverse backgrounds. The narrated life stories were analyzed through storying stories (McCormack, 2004). The study obtained ethical clearance from Research Ethics Committee. Participants consented to their accounts being used in the study. The issues of confidentiality were assured and the authors used pseudonyms in presenting the findings.

A discourse and thematic analysis were conducted with the qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation. The core questions explored were: How do colonial legacies continue to shape and reshape gender norms, decision making and leadership in the economy, politics and other public spheres? How do grassroots movements, local initiatives and indigenous epistemologies contribute to gender equality and women empowerment? What are the alternatives to challenge hegemonic structures and harness alternative futures?

Throughout the data collection process, some patterns began to emerge in respect to the inter-sectional axes of discrimination these women were facing, based not only on their gender but on their age, class, and marital status. According to Puar (2013), 'the theory of intersectionality argues that all identities are lived and experienced as inter-sectional – in such a way that identity categories themselves are cut through and unstable – and that all subjects are inter-sectional whether or not they recognize themselves as such'. thematic analysis of the focus group discussions was undertaken drawing on the process outlined by Braun and Clarke,(2006). This involved applying research questions and theoretical lens to allow new themes to emerge, identifying new themes, refining themes to create overarching themes and develop a narrative .

Results and findings
The study reveals that gender inequality has been buttressed by the colonial vestiges of power which the patriarchal system has taken onboard and perpetuates. A Decolonial lens seeks to make us understand that there is need to interrogate the systems, the practices, the challenges and opportunities in addressing issues which affect women. This research identifies key challenges hindering the attainment of women empowerment and gender equality. Discourse analysis informed the analysis as the interest of this study is to have a critical understanding of gender equality and women empowerment. As a result, thematic approach has

been adopted in the analysis and presentation of the findings. Decolonial approaches entail unraveling of the past and positioning into new facets and beginnings. Women academics can disrupt the politics of knowledge production dominated by Euro-American normativity to produce ecologies of knowledge focusing on experiences narrated by Global South women. Memory accounts as a Decolonial method has the potential to generate counter narratives to disrupt understanding of women empowerment and gender equality. Decolonial African feminist Babalwa Magoqwana (2018) informs our analysis as knowledge production that prioritizes values such as survival, person-hood, communality, complementarity which are essential to social relations in many African communities. The themes which emerged from the memory accounts as each participant was asked to conceptualize their understanding of gender equality and women empowerment, include the role of education and indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values and norms. Of these the participants proffered the following:

> **Participant 1:** Gender equality is rooted in our indigenous knowledge systems. Growing up we all know that we have to respect our mothers and all women folk. For me the western construct of gender has had problems as it seeks to use a standard that works very well in the West. In the context I grew up in, my mother was treated equally by her in laws and my father, she had a say in the children's lives.

> **Participant 2:** Gender equality has a place for us but we need to contextualize it into our systems and practices. If I kneel before my spouse as I serve him food, I am no lesser a woman but I am simply practicing my culture. In the work environment, I expect to get the same access and opportunities as my male counterpart as we do the same job.

> **Participant 3:** Oh, indeed, if we have female representation our rights are protected and some of our needs are addressed. But do women always promote gender equality?

> **Participant 4:** My take on gender equality is premised on economic empowerment. I want to have equal access to job opportunities with no sex segregation, and equal pay for equal work. If I am employed the remuneration should enable me to support my family.

> **Participant 5:** For me it means I should be able to be make decisions in the public sphere for example at my school or any organization or government office. When we had a female deputy head, women and girls' issues such as sanitary bins/ incinerators were given priority and were budgeted for and purchased.

> **Participant 6:** The feminism that comes from academia is unrelated to me. Why should I learn about something which is unrelated to my culture or my reality?

The women participants advocate for women in leadership as a means to promote gender equality in both the public and private domains. Economic independence translates to gender equality as well as a recognition of one's cultural leanings. The women participants advocate for diverse perspectives which may help to address women and girls' concerns. For example, policies and legislation that protect their rights such as equal property rights and anti-discrimination laws. The issue of intersectionality is also mentioned as one addresses women's issues. In challenging hegemonic structures to advance gender equality, the women participants also seek to promote indigenous knowledge systems in education and other spheres. The participants advocate for education rooted in indigenous knowledge systems which may nurture cultural identity and pride and resonate with Heritage Based Education 5.0. Decolonial African feminism critiques Western feminist frameworks creating space for a feminist discourse that truly reflect and dignifies Global South women's understanding of identity, gender and epistemologies from the lived experiences of their gendered colonial difference. Decolonial feminism critiqued the nature of western knowledge production that focuses on "othering" marginalized groups through designating them as voiceless subjects for investigation through a colonial lens (Mignola, 2007). Gender relations are shaped by the historical experiences, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices of the women in the Global South.

Gender inequality is a pandemic which needs to be addressed through a lens which incorporates cultural values such as *unhu/ubuntu* and togetherness. The participants suggest that they should bring in their own senses of their lived experiences and those affected the most should be the ones promoting gender equality through an indigenous African context. While Onyebuchi Eze (2008) has explained that the individual is submerged within the community and the interests and aspirations of the community matter more than those of the individual in his exposition of *unhu/ubuntu*. However, it does not mean that the individual is lesser than the

community but that the individual and the community are interdependent. Although feminism is constituted by multiple narratives, a Western centric universalist feminism continues to dominate approaches to understanding gender equality. It is such approaches that are being interrogated and unraveled as narratives about gender equality and women empowerment are explored in the study. Granted that this may be the case, many of the stories that are told about women and men are rooted in western hegemony, which measures gender equality according to the western ways of knowing and serves to legitimize Neo-colonial forms of domination (Brenner, 2003).

Decolonial feminist theory on the other hand, challenges the dominant structures that have made invisible the agency of Global South women by giving legitimacy to their knowledge and their experiences of gender, identity and work (Makama et al, 2019). A participant even queries 'but do women always promote gender equality? While another participant also asked ' why should I learn something which is unrelated to my reality. These questions resonate with the premise fostered by decolonial African feminist who argue for an approach with new knowledge production which is rooted in the historicity and intersectionality of the African woman. It is from the women themselves that an understanding of gender equality and feminism should emanate from and not to be investigated as voiceless and marginalized populace. The ability to be able to do this leads to the empowerment of the women as they have a say in all that pertains to their lives. Their identity, culture, pride and social context are key components in the realization of women empowerment.

The approach allowed multiple constructions and influenced our understanding of gender equality and women empowerment and through this lens we were able to challenge Eurocentric assumptions and constructions of African women's passivity and gendered constructions of Africa. Instead, the study contributes to a decolonial lens that caters for a more nuanced understanding of gender empowerment as shown in the participants' expositions:

> Participant 8: Women empowerment is contextual and is rooted in my lived experience. I view women empowerment as enabling voices, participation and equitable access to resources.

> Participant 9: Women empowerment is contested. I mean once I talk about empowerment, it should be equitable and inclusive of my disability and ethnicity for it to be meaningful and impact. Otherwise,

the western lens has clouded our conception of women empowerment as anchored on education and economic wherewithal but one's context and reality should be indicators in any initiatives on empowerment. So, empowerment is not individualistic but takes a collective slant as I am quick to think of other women with disability who may not have the same opportunities and I may reach out to them to ensure that more are taken in and not left out. Yes, Western notions of empowerment tend to be individualistic in terms of rights and achievements and I am not saying that is bad. We start there but we move from the individual to the community of other women with disability for example.

> Participant 10: I should be in a position to make informed choices about reproductive health. I mean, yeah, sexual empowerment too, where I can refuse to have sex or request my partner to wear a condom or for me to wear the femidom without being labeled.

Gender equality is seen as a communal issue where the empowerment of women is linked to the health and prosperity of the entire community. This resonates with target 5.7 of SDG 5 which advocates for equal rights to economic resources, access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance in accordance with national laws. What is required is a Government Policy that not only focuses on legal and economic reforms, but rather complemented by a holistic approach that considers the sociocultural component as well as a change of mentality.

Taking a Decolonial feminist lens seeks to foster policies and programs that include the voices of all diverse women. This enables the women to take control in the shaping of their societies and may lead to improved infrastructure and services in those sectors where women are the most affected. For the participants empowerment is not only an individual journey but it is journey which seeks to bring community driven understanding on why women remain economically marginalized. The hegemonic structures need to be challenged as well as the colonial vestiges of power to ensure women have access to resources, land and economic opportunities. Harmful traditional practices and patriarchal norms are challenged using a Decolonial lens which seeks to promote and advance gender justice.

In relation to the foregoing, Lugones, (2008) views dis-empowerment and objectification as where

women's bodies become property of the 'colonizer'. A colonial past that preserves patriarchal norms, has deprived women of their voices to assert their own identities (Essof,2013). The study thus makes visible the experiences and opens debate on how gender equality is enacted as a western construct and questions the meaning of women empowerment. The study supports the drive to further decolonize the field. The study supports intersectional post-colonial feminist research and advances the 'other' female voice in debates. Sustainable Development Goal 5.5 reiterates the premise that women's participation at all levels of decision making in economic, political and public life must be ensured (Nazneen,& Okech, 2021, Tsikata & Ossome, 2024).

To challenge existing hegemonic structures in Zimbabwe, there is need for collaboration by all stakeholders who include the local community, civil society and government. To create alternative futures that are not only inclusive but sustainable and equitable, several strategies are proffered by the participants. It is imperative that local community-based organisations which advocate for gender justice, economic empowerment and gender equality empower communities. Such organizations can enhance and promote initiatives which advocate for and mobilize community- driven solutions to land rights, access to resources, and political representation. These are some of the spaces in which women face gender discrimination and marginalization.

Therefore, if the voices of the previously marginalized are included in projects, programs and policies for fair land redistribution, green energy and sustainable agriculture, then this would go a long way in ensuring that women's voices are considered. This has been the challenge for Global South women when their voices were usurped by coloniality such that some of the indigenous knowledge systems were devalued and need to be reclaimed. Organizations like the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights play a critical role in advancing social justice, protecting human rights, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. These organizations are lauded for their efforts to decolonize policies to ensure that local voices are heard and considered in governance. This can help challenge the dominance of colonial narratives on gender equality and empowerment as these initiatives are couched in the local context and capture the essence of diversity and empower communities with a sense of cultural identity and pride. This would strengthen women's voice and power in addressing interconnected issues such as poverty, gender inequality and climate change from the perspectives of the marginalized communities. The issue of intersectionality is key in a decolonial African feminist lens to reflect the lived realities and

experiences of diverse women as they espouse gender equality and empowerment. While decolonial African feminism provides space for the silenced voices of women (Lugones, 2010) in the Global South, it provides a backdrop for their knowledge and agency to become part of the gender equality and empowerment discourse. This resonates with the observations made by Mama (2011), that African feminism seeks to empower women within the political, economic and social spheres. Similarly, Atanga, (2013:308) says of African feminist activism that it includes "empowering women through access to resources such as health, education and housing".

The UN SDG 5, target 5B which seeks to promote empowered women through technology (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2024) can be achieved through enhancing the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote empowerment of women (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2024). In Zimbabwe, women's voices in the various sectors can be enhanced through the use of Artificial Intelligence for example. However, women and girls should be able to participate freely, safely and equally in both private and public life in the digital era without the digital divide widening further.

The participants view women empowerment as a result of concerted effort by the community coming together. Taking a decolonial feminist lens seeks to foster policies and programs that include the voices of all diverse women. This enables the women to take control in the shaping of their societies and may lead to improved infrastructure and services in those sectors where women are the most affected. For the participants empowerment is not only an individual journey but it is journey which seeks to bring community driven understanding on why women remain economically marginalized. The hegemonic structures need to be challenged as well as the colonial vestiges of power to ensure women have access to resources, land and economic opportunities. Harmful traditional practices and patriarchal norms are challenged using a decolonial lens which seeks to promote and advance gender justice.

In relation to the foregoing, Lugones, (2008) views disempowerment and objectification as where women's bodies become property of the 'colonizer'. A colonial past that preserves patriarchal norms, has deprived women of their voices to assert their own identities (Essof, 2013). The study thus makes visible the experiences and opens debate on how gender equality is enacted as a western construct and questions the meaning of women empowerment. The study supports the drive to further decolonize

the field. The study supports inter-sectional post-colonial feminist research and advances the 'other' female voice in debates. Sustainable Development Goal 5.5 reiterates the premise that women's participation at all levels of decision making in economic, political and public life must be ensured (Nazneen,& Okech, 2021, Tsikata & Ossome, 2024).

To challenge existing hegemonic structures in Zimbabwe there is need for collaboration by all stakeholders who include the local community, civil society and government. To create alternative futures that are not only inclusive but sustainable and equitable, it is imperative that local community -based organizations which advocate for gender justice be involved. While policies are designed and implemented, these should address the needs of women, youth, the marginalized and persons with disability. Education and dialogue can foster critical consciousness which leads to challenging hegemonic structures and empower individuals to take action for social change. This involves promoting critical thinking and awareness of social justice issues. Colonial narratives can be challenged through reforms in education where African history and perspectives are infused. Knowledge production can be enhanced by integrating indigenous knowledge systems in education. International partnerships can be fostered which seek to address global challenges such as climate change and human rights. These partnerships can provide resources, knowledge and support for local initiatives .

Conclusion

By implementing these strategies, Zimbabwe can challenge existing hegemonic structures and work towards creating alternative futures that are more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. These efforts require collaboration across various sectors of society, including government, civil society, and local communities, to ensure meaningful and lasting change. The study has presented the argument that global south women have agency and when one dialogues with them, one learns more about them than theorization about them as has been the case in the past. The study also established that gender equality and gender empowerment are understood contexually

Acknowledgement

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