

Women and Election Activism in Uganda: The Pads4Girls Social Media Campaign

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Abstract

This chapter draws on experiences from Uganda to interrogate social media's potential to facilitate women's participation in electoral processes. Through taking the Pads4Girls campaign in the aftermath of the Ugandan 2016 election as a case, the chapter examines how social media can contribute to political change and electoral democracy. Social media's potential in public communication has been demonstrated during elections globally and in heightened political situations in Uganda. Some of the most vibrant debates in Uganda were on Facebook and Twitter during the 2011 and 2016 elections and their aftermath. The data were collected through analysis of Facebook content about the Pads4girls campaign and interviewing. The chapter builds on debates about media and gender and argues that social media facilitate conversation on electoral matters but their role depends on the context within which they are applied. The Pads4Girls campaign ended with the imprisonment of its architect over cyber harassment.

Key words: pads4girls, pads4girlsug, Facebook, election campaigning, Uganda, sanitary pads, gender and social media, Stella Nyanzi

Introduction

During an election campaign in 2015, President Museveni promised that his government would provide girls of school age with menstrual hygiene materials if re-elected. He was quoted in the newspapers saying that his government would distribute free sanitary towels to girls to prevent them from skipping schoolⁱ. A year later, First Lady Janet Museveni who by then was the Minister of Education, announced that the government had no money to provide the pads. Several Ugandans took to social media to vent their displeasure at the lies of the president and politicians. They accused the president of renegeing on his campaign promise and also criticised Janet Museveni, for being an accomplice in this, despite being a woman and a mother.

One woman's rant in Facebook posts translated into the Pads4Girls campaign to provide free sanitary towels to girls in March 2019. Thus, the campaignⁱⁱ was born following the Ugandan government's failure to honour a presidential election campaign promise. The campaign was championed by Stella Nyanzi, an academic and research fellow at Makerere University. She formed a voluntary working group to coordinate the campaign. The group, which was made up of 40 volunteers, opened so called #Padbanks and appealed to social media users to contribute to the campaignⁱⁱⁱ. The campaign, having initially aimed to collect one million pads, collected over 10 million pads and reached out to more than 2,000 girls (*The Observer*, 2017). Stella Nyanzi started the Pads4Girls campaign on Facebook to rally women and citizenry to demand that government fulfil its election campaign promise of supplying sanitary towels. The campaign aimed to show the leadership of Uganda that menstrual hygiene materials could be supplied if prioritised. Stella Nyanzi used her personal Facebook page to condemn the government's deceit and to publicise the cause. Activities were organised both online and offline, which included press conferences, media appearances and visits to schools in rural Uganda to talk to young people about hygiene and to distribute sanitary towels. Opposition politicians joined the movement, calling on the government to provide the materials promised. The campaign antagonized powerful figures in government and led to Stella Nyanzi's imprisonment.

Social media in Uganda

Social media has, in Uganda, pervaded the social fabric of society and is arguably changing the face of public communication in the country. As journalist Daniel Kalinaki (2016) observes, social media is transforming the way 'audiences engage with information,

authorities and institutions of traditional power in Uganda'. Facebook was, at the time of writing, the most widely used social networking website with 2,600,000 users^{iv}. Despite the small number of users compared to those in more digitally advanced countries, there is no doubt that websites are growing in importance also in this East African country (Kamp, Rugambwa & Messerschmidt, 2016; Javuru, 2013; BBC, 2012).

Social media in Uganda has become an important source of information for users, including professional journalists (Namasinga, 2018). People use social media to share information about government policies, actions, abuse, police brutality, and daily societal occurrences (Javuru, 2013, p.367). Social media provide citizens with the opportunity to converge and to express their views on a range of issues. Government and civil society take to social media to share information, to communicate with the citizenry and to disseminate propaganda. The platforms facilitate conversation between citizens and their leaders, provide government agents and stifled political opposition groups with the opportunity for dialogue, to pass information on to the electorate and for mobilisation. Facebook is an alternative platform for opposition politicians and civil groups with limited access to mainstream media.

Their influence was first highlighted in 2011, when the government asked Internet service providers to shut down social media during the walk-to-work^v protests (BBC, 2012; Heacock, 2011). The government shut down Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp on election day 18 February 2016 and the president's swearing-in on 12 May 2016. The shutdown of social media and the introduction in July 2018 of a levy of US\$ 0.05 (Sh200) for the use of, for example, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube in Uganda was seen as a means of demobilising political participation, and as a blow to the consolidation of democratic in Africa (Ojok, 2016; Anena, 2016).

The use of Internet applications by political candidates as a campaign tool to share manifestos, connect with the electorate and to mobilise support in the 2016 presidential elections, further emphasised the significance of social media in politics^{vi}. Social media, according to Ojok (2016), intensified electoral participation in Uganda, with citizens using Facebook and Twitter to campaign for and against candidates. Hashtags such as *#Ugandadecides* and *#UGDebate16* dominated the country's social media sphere, users taking to Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to debate the election and politics. Amama

Mbabazi, one of the presidential contenders, used YouTube to officially announce his candidature.

A study of media coverage of the 2016 elections shows that the three main presidential candidates, Yoweri Museveni, Kizza Besigye and Amama Mbabazi used Twitter in the same way as they used conventional media (ACME, 2016). They used microblogs to spread information to the electorate, rather than as platforms of engagement (ibid). Little empirical and theoretical research has been carried out into the role of social media in electoral democracy in Uganda, despite their growing importance in politics and elections. Little is, in particular, known about women's involvement via social media in electoral activities in East Africa. The literature on gender, social media and political communication, which is reviewed later, mostly emanates from the US and Europe.

Women in politics and elections

Women's involvement in politics in Africa can be described as a slow but improving process (Amundsen & Kayuni, 2016). Women are finding ways to participate in the political life of their countries and there is a noticeable increase in the participation of women in decision-making and in political life in countries such as Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Female candidates are, furthermore, contesting and winning elections and hold important positions in governments of those countries (Abdennebi-Abderrahim, 2013). The election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia in 2006 and Joyce Banda in Malawi in 2012 as heads of state is evidence of how much the status of women has improved.

Several countries across Africa are signatories of international charters that seek to achieve gender equality and include women in decision-making processes. Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Uganda have put in place measures such as affirmative action, to increase women's participation in governance and public life. While this has been partly attributed to power-seeking politicians who seek women's electoral support (Ottemoeller, 1999), the mechanism has improved the status of female participants in politics. In October 2018, Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed appointed women to half of his government's cabinet, including to the post of Defence Minister. Ethiopia is the second African country, after Rwanda, to have equal gender representation in the cabinet. Women can contest in competitive elections and assume political positions in parliament and government. However, the majority of women remain under-represented and removed from decision-making levels. Their input in electoral

and decision-making processes often remains in the hands of their male counterparts. Generally, women remain on the margins in politics and elections despite measures to change the status quo. The political playing field is uneven and not conducive to women due to obstacles such as highly competitive electoral systems, poverty, sexism, a culture that undermines women and deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs (Hamandishe, 2018).

Whereas the legal framework does not discriminate against women, their participation in elections as candidates and as commentators on electoral-related issues remains low due to the country's social, economic and cultural structure. Empirical research shows that women in Uganda are marginalised in mainstream media coverage of elections and that female candidates receive the least coverage across all media platforms (ACME, 2016).

Menstruation – taboo, hygiene and political value

Montgomery in 1974 described menstrual taboos as being 'transcultural in nature, represented along a continuum that ranges from mild uneasiness and distrust of menstrual fluid and menstruating women, and ultimately to complete seclusion during the menstrual period' (1974, pp.137-138). Menstruation is a universal experience shared by all women. It is, even so, also a globally stigmatised issue, the impact of menstruation on society being seen directly in the educational opportunities, quality of life and professional endeavours of females. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to one of the world's fastest-growing teenage girl populations.

Menstruation is a natural process but issues surrounding it remain poorly prioritised by governments in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2014). Findings show that school dropout rates for girls from low-income countries increase when they reach puberty. They also show that girls in low-income settings miss or struggle at school during menstruation, if they are unable to effectively manage their menstrual hygiene (ibid). This is supported by Boosey et al (2014), who explore menstrual hygiene practices and knowledge of rural state primary school girls in Rukungiri district of Uganda. Good menstrual hygiene management (MHM) requires access to the required resources (for example menstrual pads, soap and water), facilities (for example a secluded place to wash and change, and an adequate disposal system) and to MHM education. The findings show that menstruation-related absenteeism was high. 61.7 % of girls missed school at least once a month and 87.8 % had not been able to buy sanitary pads on at least one occasion, 61.6% of these because they could not afford them and 34.6% because

disposable pads were not available in local shops (Boosey et al, 2014). The researchers found that female teachers also sometimes missed school for menstrual-related reasons (Boosey et al, 2014). Boosey et al also found that senior female teachers reported that male head teachers rarely allocated enough funding to resources and facilities to help girls to manage their menstrual hygiene. It is a lack of knowledge that perpetuates the myths that isolate and shame women during their monthly periods. Drawing attention to the girls and women who do not have access to pads and refusing to let the stigma of periods hold back women, is seen to play an important role in the easing of this situation for girls and women. It can also be argued that menstruation is of significance in achieving SDGs (goal 3,4,5,6,8 and 12).

Access to hygienic sanitary towels and educational materials remains a challenge in Uganda. Around 61% of girls in the country miss school every year due to menstrual hygiene, 30% dropping out of school completely (*The Guardian*, 2014)^{vii}. Through promising free pads and free education-related items, the then presidential candidate appealed to women who are an influential voting bloc.

Social media and political communication

Research on the interplay between Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and politics, highlights the Internet's role in political communication during elections and its use by politicians to communicate with voters (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuanm, 2012). More recent research focuses on social media's relevance in political communication. For Web 2.0 technologies, academic inquiry pays attention to the impact of social media on political participation and civic engagement (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Xenos, et al, 2014) and on politicians' use of social media during elections (Kalsnes, Larsson & Enli, 2017; Graham, et al, 2013). Such studies reflect social media as an enabler of the political participation of the citizenry and how it is employed to create a dialogue between voters and aspirants to political office. The studies focus on how political actors and political parties employ social media for political purposes (Stieglitz et al, 2012; Wattal et al, 2010). There is, therefore, a burgeoning body of literature on the role of social media in elections. The research indicates that social media is an important tool in political communication during election campaigns (Towner & Dulio, 2011; Robertson, et al, 2010a). Politicians use social media to connect with potential voters and to disseminate information. The research shows Facebook to be a legitimate location for the discussion of political issues. Social media has,

without doubt, been integrated into politics and into electioneering in digitally advanced countries. Politicians and ordinary individuals take advantage of the platforms to create and share information, to interact, communicate and mobilise and for the branding and marketing of their ideas.

Social media's impact on politics has also been registered in the Global South. The uprisings that led to the downfall of despotic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are partially attributed to social media (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheaffer, 2013). Elsewhere in Africa there are indications that social media facilitate citizens' participation in democratic processes and that this is beneficial to politicians and citizens during elections (Dzisah, 2018; Mare, 2018; Onyechi, 2018). These studies reflect sentiments such as those noted by scholars in more digitally and democratically advanced contexts. The studies, however, often hype the impact of ICTs on electoral processes (Mare, 2018). We acknowledge that social media is not an end in itself. As Wolfsfeld et al (2013) argue, it is imperative to consider the political environment in which the platforms are used, if social media and its impact in, for example the African context, are to be fully comprehended. The impact of the platforms can be realised when certain factors are at play. These factors include high levels of internet penetration, some degree of democracy, access to information, citizens' digital literacy and a willingness to participate in democratic transition.

Gender, social media and political behaviour

Gender differences historically exist both in political engagement and online. Bodes (2017) found that these differences are most likely to emerge in the most visible political behaviours. This suggests that women strategically engage in less visible or less-likely to offend political behaviours than men. Findings in the field of social media are, however, more mixed. Some scholars find that men are more likely to express themselves politically on social media (Lutz et al, 2014), whereas other research concludes that there is no such difference on social media (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012; Bodes, 2017).

Vochochova (2016), however, contends that most studies deal with gender merely as a control variable rather than building an entire design around it. She argues that such studies typically do not indicate significant differences between men and women in the ways they participate online. Gender aspects of online political participation is a relatively unexplored area. Very little research within this field takes women as the point of departure. There is, at the same

time, a worldwide gender-based digital divide in terms of access to and use of online platforms, the proportion of women using the Internet being 12% lower than that of men, this gender gap widens to 32.9% in the least developed countries (Chakravorti, 2017).

As politics increasingly moves online and as online communication rapidly and increasingly becomes a growing force in civic engagement, so has the gaps in the political field and in social media become, together, particularly important (Bodes, 2017; Rainie et al, 2012). Some researchers worry that online political activities might replace offline activities, in so-called 'slactivism', in which 'our digital effort make us feel very useful and important but have zero social impact' (Morozov, 2013). A lot of research, however, suggests that online politics complements offline politics instead of replacing it (Xenos et al, 2014).

The intersection of gender and other factors is an important part of traditional explanations of the 'gender gap' in political participation. Political participation should be studied as a gendered action influenced by the individual's socialization, access and opportunities, to explain different participation patterns among men and women (Vochocova et al, 2016).

Women are less frequent and less intense users of the Internet, this difference being particularly clear in the way men and women spend their time online. Women tend, in general, to use the Internet for social interaction and relationship maintenance. Men, however, are more likely to search for information, for example on news, politics, sports and finance (Abraham et al, 2010; Li & Kirkup, 2007), echoing a broader pattern of gender differences in communication (Wood & Rhodes, 1992). Some research suggests that there is a possibility that women will abstain from political engagement when they feel at risk of offending or alienating others (Bodes, 2017). Junco (2013) shows how women tend, more frequently, to take part in activities that connect them to others, typically in expressive online activities such as posting, tagging photos and commenting on other's content. Brandtzaeg's (2017) study explored gender disparities in Facebook liking practices that act as expressions of civic engagement, among more than 21.7 million Facebook users in 10 countries across Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe. He found that males were drawn more towards politically and information-oriented liking practices than females. The study found, through combining age, gender and location, that young women (13-28 years) in Europe and the Americas are more likely than men to support humanitarian aid and environmental issues on

Facebook. This was not, however, evident in Asia and Africa, where men were more active in liking all forms of civic expressions on Facebook.

It is important to take into consideration that women, when using the Internet, might face additional hostility. Women around the world report being bombarded by a culture of misogyny online, including aggressive, often sexualized hate speech, direct threats of violence, harassment, and revenge porn involving the use of private information to defame them (Web Foundation, 2015).

This chapter, therefore, examines social media's potential to facilitate women's participation in the discussion of election related issues in Uganda. The Pads4Girls campaign in the aftermath of the 2016 elections serves as a case to study how women used Facebook for civic engagement on an election-related issue. The leading research questions are: How did women use Facebook to address politicians about election promises in the Pads4Girls campaign? Do the Facebook messages contain any direct political recommendations? Do they urge women to vote or become more active citizens?

Methods

There are several ways of measuring political engagement on social media. We used a specific case, the Pads4Girls campaign in Uganda. A case study is an in-depth investigation of a specific situation and is used to narrow down a broad field of research into a more easily researchable topic (Yin, 2009). The Pads4Girls campaign allowed elaboration of gender and online civic engagement in Uganda. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012) of Facebook posts and interviewing (Hennink et al, 2011) provide robust findings and strengthen this research's contribution to knowledge about social media's role in electoral processes. Using diverse methods generated useful data and mitigated limitations of relying on one method. We analysed posts between February and March 2017 to obtain more knowledge on how the campaign evolved and how Facebook was used to promote it. We did not face problems associated with analysis of web-based content such as sampling and coding because we studied all Pads4Girls posts within the campaign period. Identifying and retrieving the posts was easy as they were clearly marked, they were on one Facebook account and few in number. The selection criterion for the posts that were analysed was that the post directly related to the Pads4Girls campaign. The content of analysed posts fell into four categories: political messages, mobilisation and advocacy, field visits and distribution of pads. We were

also interested in whether a post included a link, pictures or videos, had any direct political recommendation, and/or urged women to engage in politics or vote. We chose not to analyse comments on the posts.

We planned to interview Stella Nyanzi, the architect of the campaign but she was arrested a week before she could be interviewed and was still in prison at the time of writing. We interviewed Stella Nyanzi's sister Sheillah Nyanzi, who was the Pads4Girls campaign's lead strategist. She was interviewed in Kampala on 15 November 2018. The interview was recorded and transcribed. The interview focused on the agency and structure of the campaign to provide deeper insights into the use of Facebook for civic and political expression and the possible connection between online and offline activism. We used cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002) by putting together views from different posts to common perspectives on central issues. We analyse the campaign in more detail in the next section.

Findings

We set out to study, through the Pads4Girls campaign, how Facebook was used to address the election promises of Ugandan politicians. We identified and analysed 42 posts made between 15 February 2017 and 31 March 2017. Stella Nyanzi describes herself on her timeline as a 'die-hard facebooker...' meaning she used Facebook more than any other form of social media for the campaign. Posts took the form of text, pictures, posters and videos. We also analysed selected posts for the number reactions/likes, number of comments, number of times a post was shared, to understand whether the posts can be linked to the offline campaign.

The first post appeared on 15 February 2017 as a reaction to the announcement in parliament that the government lacked the funds to offer free sanitary pads, as had been promised. The 482-word post directly addresses the Minister of Education and First Lady in her capacity as a wife, woman and mother. The post portrays the First Lady as an accomplice of President Museveni and the regime as one that does not care about poor girls who cannot afford menstrual materials. It emphasises that girls who do not have menstrual hygiene materials will stay away from school during their period. The post also raises issues that affect Uganda such as poverty, bribery, corruption and misappropriation of funds. Nyanzi explicitly mentions vote rigging in elections. The post, which had more than 36,000 likes and 774 comments, reflects the magnitude of the interest in the topic of lack of sanitary pads.

Nyanzi was, as a result of this post, summoned to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) and charged with cyber harassment and computer misuse. The campaign’s lead strategist and Stella’s younger sister, Sheillah Nyanzi, explained this as follows:

When it was clear that this is political persecution more than anything else – we said that we needed to sanitize the process. As using sanitary pads is a sanitation issue [we thought]: to sanitize a dirty regime! For us it was symbolic, and it was also a good way to cure political manipulation (personal communication, 15.11.2018).

She further explained that many Ugandan women felt that the president forgot the electorate after being re-elected, a failure that was further antagonised by his wife’s announcement of the lack of funds for MHM. Stella Nyanzi, in response to the summons to CID, called upon the public through Facebook to bring sanitary pads to CID. Sheillah said that many people responded to the call and brought menstrual hygiene materials, those responding including women, activists concerned about issues of access to education and inequality, and the mainstream media. ‘A lot of them related with her [Stella Nyanzi] in the sense that she is a woman...[and] - What if I am next?’ (personal communication, 15.11.2018). This indicates that initiatives that are as topically and clearly-targeted as this one, may prompt more women to become more active, to assert their needs upon elected leaders and to become more aware of their social and political rights. The architects of the Pads4Girls campaign and their sympathisers regarded the government’s failure to provide pads as a breach of promise, the government furthermore used criminal charges to attempt to limit the campaigners’ freedom of expression. As Sheillah Nyanzi put it, leaders who make political promises have a mandate to deliver after being voted.

Post format

Posts related to the Pads4Girls campaign took the forms of text, video, pictures and Internet links, as summarised below:

Table showing type of post for the campaign

Post type	Number of times type appears	%
Text only	6	14.3
Text + pics	22	52.3
Pics only	2	4.7

Video + text	2	4.7
Video only	3	7
Internet Link + text	7	17
Link only	-	-
Total	42	100

As can be seen from the table, more than half (52%) of all posts contain both text and pictures. The writer extensively used images to illustrate her point of view and as evidence of the issues she raised. The pictures tell the story of the campaign. They show the campaign team meeting students and teachers at schools, receiving sanitary pads, distributing them, meeting journalists, politicians and local producers of sanitary pads, and show boxes of pads. The frequent use of images of real and drawn pads is considered to be an important element in the process of normalising menstruation. Pads are often a taboo as menstruation itself and are seldom shown in their real form in public. They are usually concealed in boxes or bags when illustrated, for example, in commercials. Other pictures in the posts are documents such as a letter from the police summoning Stella, documents of air tickets and an image of a counterfeit Facebook page alert (FB post 17.03.2017) in which the activist draws readers to a post in which she is announced dead (FB post 12.03.2017).

There were six text-only posts (14.3%) of all posts analysed, most being long write ups of between 19 and 548 words, the average being 303.5 words. The writer also shared external Internet links, most being to *GoFundMe* for mobilisation of funds for buying sanitary pads. Other links include a YouTube video and an online article in which a government minister threatens to arrest Stella Nyanzi.

A few videos were used. They were however long, between four and 17 minutes. The videos show Stella criticising the government and talking about the importance of providing menstrual hygiene materials. For example, in one live video post titled *Pilot Starts*, Stella explains the campaign by saying, ‘citizens are taking care of Uganda’s poor girls who are neglected by government, the president, minister of education and parliament’ (FB post 12.03.2017). The running theme in most of the posts is that President Museveni failed to honour his campaign promise after re-election, describing the unfulfilled promise as ‘...deceitful promises’, ‘lies’, ‘deception’ and ‘manipulation of poor people’s lack...’

Categories of content of posts

Posts fall into four major categories, political messages, mobilisation and advocacy messages, field visits and distribution of pads messages and messages that combine politics, mobilisation and distribution messages (mixed content). These are shown in the table below:

Category of content	Frequency	Percentage
Political messages	8	19
Mobilisation and advocacy	13	31
Field visits & distribution	13	31
Mixed content (politics, mobilisation & distribution)	8	19
Total	42	100

Political messages

Political content comprised 19% of the total number of posts as per the above table. They contain political rhetoric and address and challenge the President, the First Lady, women in positions of power and the government in general. These posts are directly critical of the government and point out its weaknesses including corruption, dictatorship, lawlessness, rigging of elections and nepotism. For example, on 04.03.2017, Stella Nyanzi regards the police summons as an attempt to gag, censor and silence her adding, ‘... I will not stop speaking my critique of the dictatorial corrupt lawless and rogue regime of the Musevenis.’ Another post is about high government expenditure on security instead of prioritising education. On 17.02.2017, she writes, ‘Tell Yoweri Museveni to give a presidential handshake^{viii} to Uganda’s poor young women ... Cut down the expenditure on bullets and buy re-usable menstruation pads.’ One example of nepotism highlighted in the post is the appointment of the First Lady as Minister of Education. The post reads,

She is not only wife to dictator Yoweri Museveni who lied to poor Ugandans during his presidential campaigns about giving sanitary pads to their daughters, she is also the dry-eyed beneficiary of nepotism as the Minister of Education.

The posts describe the President as a dictator and the First Lady as a powerful woman who has failed to use her position to improve the lives of the poor. Stella writes, ‘What is the

usefulness of powerful women who sleep under dictators to poor women ...?' The post regards the First Lady as an accomplice of the president. The writer asks:

Why should I pad Janet Kataaha Museveni, yet she justified to parliament the lies about our government lacking money to provide sanitary pads to poor Ugandan girls - although her husband manipulated voters during his presidential campaigns with empty promises of the same pad.

Mobilisation and advocacy

The second category involves posts that mobilise the donation of sanitary pads. There were 13 posts containing mobilisation and advocacy messages, which represent 31% of all posts in the studied period. The pads and funds mobilisation started after the writer received police summons. She explains in a post of 04.03.2017 that police were investigating her for offensive communication and cyber harassment. Her social media posts were, shown by her summons to CID, being treated as criminal in nature. At this point she calls on friends and well-wishers to support her by going to 'Kibuli police station with clean sanitary pads and menstrual hygiene products.' The post in part reads:

As the CID boys and girls grill me about my social media postings and tweets, my friends and supporters will challenge Janet Kataaha Museveni and her husband Yoweri Museveni, by collecting sanitary towels to distribute to some of our poor students in the country. Please come in plenty and join us sanitize Uganda. Bring a pad or two, a packet of pads or more, a box of pads or more to Kibuli Police Station (FB 06.03.2017).

Sheillah, the campaign strategist, gave a similar account, attributing the genesis of the campaign to the criminal summons served upon Stella. Her appearance before police was, to them, an opportunity to begin cleansing what they considered to be 'a dirty system'. A second post on 06.03.2017 explains the motive for collecting sanitary pads and call to action of the public to participate in a cause that will help poor girls and liberate Uganda. Stella further writes:

Considering that the police officers will interrogate me about my social media posts critiquing Janet Kataaha Museveni for shamelessly declaring in parliament that there is no money to buy sanitary pads for Uganda's poor daughters who stay out of school during their menstruation, I have decided to use this visit to CID to collect sanitary pads for Uganda's poor girls. We will collect these sanitary pads and distribute them to rural-poor students. Let us liberate ourselves by sanitizing our poor daughters of Uganda (FB post 06.03.2017).

Subsequent posts in this category request financial contributions, provide a mobile telephone

number for electronic money transfers and share a link^{ix} for crowdfunding for sympathisers abroad. The call, which brought people to Kibuli Police station with sanitary pads and posters to show their support for Stella Nyanzi.

According to a post of 09.03.2017, journalists, independent activists and an outspoken opposition female member of parliament were among those who came to CID. The post furthermore states:

During this interrogation, some concerned individuals brought sanitary pads and posters of support, in response to my call for us to provide for Uganda's poor daughters because the Museveni had reneged on the promise of pads. Many public media houses sent representatives to cover the event. A female radio presenter invited my sister and I to her show where their radio station contributed two boxes of sanitary pads towards our cause. She also gave us uncensored airtime to articulate issues important to us as women with a cause (FB post 09.03.2017).

A post of 10.03.2017 reflects an organised initiative by a group of volunteers, a coordinator and a publicity manager. The post indicates that the campaign had partnered with local radio stations such as Dembe FM and Beat FM to act as collection points for sanitary pads. Several posts are about locally-produced menstrual materials which the Pads4Girls campaign team found on the market. A post of 18.03.2017 talks about receiving a donation of 500 packets of sanitary pads from the founder of Afripads Uganda Limited and free training on menstrual health and hygiene. The post further reads:

We practiced how to effectively and efficiently use the re-useable sanitary pads. Questions are answered. Experiences are exchanged. Alongside this knowledge comes durable laminated teaching aids, visuals guides, and illustrated booklets (FB post 10.03.2017).

Stella Nyanzi acknowledges all support received and appeals for contributions in the form of actual sanitary pads. The day Stella appeared at CID (07.03.2017), it was announced in a Facebook post that they had raised UGX2,462,784 (US\$660.6) and US\$1,005 via the GoFundMe online page. The initiative also caught the attention of mainstream media, the campaign in two days raising more than US\$3,200 (about UGX12 million) and many boxes and packs of menstrual hygiene materials. The campaign raised approximately US\$5,852 through the GoFundMe initiative. The writer sees donors as contributing to ‘sanitize Uganda by taking free pads to poor students’ and as a way of showing ‘our leaders what it means to be servants of the under-privileged.’

Distribution of pads

Some posts are about field visits and distribution of pads, 13 posts being on these topics (31% of the total number of posts). The Pads4Girls campaign team took the campaign, at this stage and after surveying and pre-testing the sanitary pads on the market, to the beneficiaries of the campaign in rural schools to begin actual distribution. These 13 posts document the activities carried out by the campaign team, including giving interviews to journalists, appearing on TV talk shows, travelling to schools, visiting local factories that produce affordable menstrual materials, distributing sanitary pads and school materials and teaching about menstrual hygiene.

Posts under this category represent a form of accountability for the money and sanitary pads donated. The writer reports on teaching and the distribution of menstrual materials, extensively using pictures to show the team at work at different locations. The writer mentions in each of these posts, the schools visited, activities undertaken, the number of pads distributed and the number of beneficiaries. The posts end with a thank you to supporters and assurances that the funds and donations will not be misappropriated.

Posts with mixed content

These posts contain direct political messages, appeals for donations and information about distributions. There were eight such posts. For example, the writer in a post of 24.03.2017 talks about politicians who have supported the campaign and joined in distributing sanitary pads. The post also reports the number of girls and teachers who received free menstrual and other hygienic materials. The writer, at the same time, attacks leaders for letting down the electorate after being voted into power. The political part of the post reads as follows:

We, concerned citizens are showing President Museveni and his wife (who is also the Minister of Education) that all it takes to provide basic needs of sanitary pads to poor school girls in Uganda is the will, a bit of thinking, partnerships and lobbying those who have to give those without. Shame on our heartless national leaders for failing to prioritise gender generational needs for the under privileged in Uganda. Shame to the presidential couple for promising to give free sanitary pads to poor students - when they wanted votes - and then telling our parliamentarians that Uganda lacks money for these pads.

The writer uses the platform to criticise Uganda's political establishment and to rally her followers to support the campaign, their actions being a way of showing that citizens can play

an important role in improving the lives of others.

Contributing to political change and electoral democracy?

Two of our research questions are: Do the Facebook messages contain any direct political recommendations? Do they urge women to vote or become more active citizens? Most posts did not contain any direct political recommendations, none containing explicit messages urging women to vote or become more active citizens. The political dimension of the campaign is, even so, indisputable, as campaign strategist Sheillah Nyanzi points out in the following:

Again, we were founded on a political manipulation that we turned into a social victory. So politics if it is curing genuine societal needs should be able to ride on social media. Everything is political. [...]. So, I know that elections can be equally successful.

Sheillah continued by saying that the whole concept of social media was a misnomer: ‘Why do you call it social media? Because it is a platform for socializing, but it is also political media. [...] And everything we do is political anyway’ (personal communication 15.11.2018).

Stella Nyanzi directs most of her messages at the Ugandan citizenry, irrespective of gender. She explains in a post of 16.03.2017 that despite the issue of menstrual hygiene mostly affecting women, that the campaign is a ‘citizen intervention run and sponsored by citizens who are trying to fill the gap and ensure that girls in our country no longer miss school due to lack of safe menstrual materials.’ The messages are therefore not only directed towards women, but also to individuals, organisations and communities interested in improving education through contributing to reduced absenteeism in schools due to lack of menstrual hygienic materials.

Most of the posts address citizens of all genders. A message posted on 23.03.2017, however, indirectly recommends that all women across the political divide support the cause, noting that, ‘our citizen’s campaign to provide sanitary pads to school girls is non-partisan, we partner with all willing stakeholders interested in serving under-privileged girls in Uganda.’ Some messages point out specific female politicians who identify with the cause and who have participated in giving and distributing sanitary pads. The female politicians Betty Namboze and Sarah Eperu were both elected opposition members of parliament, representing the Democratic Party (DP) and the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). One

Facebook post praises Namboozie for mobilising schools in her constituency and partnering with the Pads4Girls team to educate and distribute sanitary pads free of charge. The post of 24.03.2017 describes her as ‘the only legislator in Uganda, today, with a heart that beats for our country’s under-privileged school girls.’ The message further reads:

I rarely kneel down sincerely, but for the first time in many years, I knelt down in recognition and with appreciation of a rare but true woman leader! Hon. Betty Namboozie Bakileke oyeeeeee!

This does not pass as direct political campaigning for her. It is, however, an indirect way of endorsing her and presenting her as the right leader. One post (14.03.2017) also identifies two male members of parliament who supported the campaign and gave money to the team on behalf of the Equal Opportunities Committee in parliament. Facebook messages that proclaim and praise opposition politicians for supporting a cause that was shunned by the government, discredits politicians in power and casts opposition politicians in a positive light.

One post, in what appears to be a political recommendation, calls on Ugandans (not just women), global citizens concerned about civil liberties, human rights and constitutional freedoms to resist collective and individual human rights violations, as follows:

We must arise, resist, and defeat these rapists of our motherland. I am gathering my irish potatoes, camera-phone, laptop and cooking pots to go and wage a liberation war against these men with guns, knives and poison. Please join me with whatever weapons you have. We must liberate our country from Museveni's occupation (FB post 19.03.2017).

This message was posted after the writer learned that she was on a no-fly list due to police charges relating to her use of social media. She was barred from travelling to the Netherlands for an academic conference. The messages urge all Ugandans to, irrespective of gender, do something about the injustice.

Impact of the Pads4Girls campaign

The Facebook posts resulted in an offline campaign in which funds were collected and sanitary pads were mobilised and distributed to schools. As one of the central participants in the campaign explained in an interview:

The campaign was more than successful [...] The working group was started at the police station [...] An then it evolved so quickly. In three days, we had hit our target of 1 million pads... in three days we had a million pads. In two weeks, we had 7 million pads...We showed that if the government cannot deliver, we will deliver.

(personal communication, 15.11.2018)

The campaign attracted the mainstream media, which supported the campaign by giving sanitary pads and cash, and by inviting the Pads4Girls campaigners onto talk shows on radio and TV. The campaign therefore gained coverage in local newspapers, radio and television and in international media. Three posts in particular talk about the role of journalists and mainstream media in the campaign. One Facebook post (17.03.2017) stresses the importance of what the writer calls ‘public media’, meaning conventional media. The message regards mainstream media as ‘important allies in the citizen-led intervention to take sanitary #Pads4GirlsUg to poor girls who miss school during their menstruation due to lack of menstrual hygiene materials.’

Social media’s effect on traditional media’s news reporting can be seen through news editors, and in some cases the governments that they observe, no longer being the gatekeepers of information. The cost of distribution has almost completely disappeared, resulting in radically different power relations. As Sheillah noted: ‘It was absolutely fantastic in the sense that social media draw mainstream media. It was kind of the reverse of what would ordinarily be happening in Uganda’ (personal communication, 15.11.2018). Traditional offline media driving online media is often talked about. This relationship is here reversed.

The analysis points to the role of women leaders in the cause. This is reflected in sentiments expressed by campaign strategist Sheillah, who stressed how women from all walks of life and from all political parties supported the movement. We see in the analysis of the Facebook posts, how the number of people supporting the Pads4Girls campaign, including politicians, increases. For example, the Facebook posts of 23 and 24 March are about two female members of parliament who supported the campaign. One post also states that a female member of parliament had joined the Pads4Girls team to distribute and talk about menstrual hygiene. The post states:

Hon. MP Betty Nambooze Bakileke [...] invited over one thousand students from primary and secondary schools in her constituency of Mukono to gather together at Seeta playground. She also invited the field team at #Pads4GirlsUg to distribute menstrual hygiene and health materials to these girls. Wow! What a day of service! After introducing the Member of Parliament to our red aprons which symbolise our mission of serving poor girls in Uganda with sanitary pads, Hon. Betty Nambooze got an apron and put it on. She gave aprons to public officials in Mukono to wear and

distribute materials along with our team. Then she counselled the gathered students about the normalcy of menstruation and the importance of avoiding pre-marital sex while still in school.

Another renowned female member of parliament is referred to in a post of 23.03.2017 as participating in the campaign, the post stating: ‘Today the team at #Pads4GirlsUg partnered with Hon. Sarah Eperu of the FDC Women’s League and distributed menstrual hygiene materials to girls and teachers in three senior secondary schools in Ngora District.’

Two male parliamentarians also joined the campaign as stated in a 14.03.2017 message: ‘Hon. Muhammad Nsereko and Hon. Kato Lubwama were two male members of parliament who have joined Hon. Betty Nambuuzi Balileke in supporting the citizens’ movement aimed at providing free sanitary pads to poor rural girls in Uganda’ (FB, 14.03.2017).

The analysis also shows that the campaign attracted established companies and organizations, some being producers of sanitary pads. For example, TUK Band 256 played at a fundraising event organized by Ice Breakers Uganda (IBU), the proceeds being donated to the Pads4Girls campaign (Facebook 16 & 27.03.2017). The posts also indicated that local producers of low-cost sanitary pads such as Afripads Uganda Limited and Shuya Pads, had donated pads and reading materials on menstrual hygiene (FB 15.03.2017).

The government responded to the campaign and the Facebook posts by charging Stella Nyanzi with offensive communication and cyber harassment, to prevent her from using social media. She was blocked from travelling abroad and there were reports that mainstream media had been ordered not to report about her or the campaign. The government ordered schools not to invite the Pads4Girls campaigners, to intimidate her through interrogations, and to suspend her from her job. The distribution of sanitary pads eventually stopped just before Stella Nyanzi’s arrest and incarceration in Luzira maximum security prison.

The First Lady Janet Museveni, who rarely gives media interviews, responded through a televised interview, which was widely shared on social media. The First Lady says in the interview: ‘I have received reports about Dr Stella Nyanzi insulting me. I don’t know what wrong I committed to deserve that kind of language and abuse. However, I want to tell Ugandans that I forgive her.’ What started as one woman’s Facebook posts turned into something big, attracting the attention of policy makers, politicians and activists and making headlines in the conventional media. On the 31.03.2017, Nyanzi shares on Facebook the front page of the *Daily Monitor*, one of the main news publications in Uganda and its headline ‘Dr.

Nyanzi sacked for insulting the first lady.’

Discussion and conclusions

Stella Nyanzi’s arrest and prosecution shows the potential impact of conversations on social media and how seriously semi-democratic regimes such as Uganda take online platforms. The online and offline campaign further show the growing importance to social and political activism of platforms such as Facebook, and their importance to the messages of individual activists that would not make it into the mainstream press. This furthermore highlights that social media users (non-professional journalists) are setting the agenda away from conventional media and professional journalists, through independent unaffiliated individuals such as Stella Nyanzi. Digital activists, prior to this campaign, used pseudonyms when criticising the government. They were also widely believed to be men, such as Tom Voltaire Okwalinga, who is very critical of the government. No one, however, knows his identity. As veteran journalist and analyst Charles Onyango Obbo muses, the government’s response to the Pads4Girls Facebook posts shows the power of social activism. He rightly argues: ‘the pads4girls campaign set Facebook on fire and upset those in power [...]. She [Stella] is the first neck on the chopping board female social media combatant. Unlike other digital media activists who are men and anonymous, Nyanzi is the first female Ugandan to criticise the establishment using her name and known identity’ (Obbo, 2017). Nyanzi, therefore, became the first female social media critic of the government who was not anonymous, an aspect that reflects a shift in gender, politics and power in Uganda. It also reflects the capacity of social media platforms to enable women such as Nyanzi to directly and boldly address elected leaders and demand accountability.

The subject of menstruation and menstrual hygiene remains a highly private matter and a taboo which is not openly discussed in public. We can however rightly conclude, in this case, that social media enabled open discussions on the subject. This would not have been possible in the mainstream press. The Pads4Girls case also highlights the significance of social media in political communication and mobilisation for a social cause. The campaign points to shifting dynamics in the use of Facebook. This highlights the inadequacies of political campaigning and emphasises social media’s role during and after elections.

This chapter, unlike previous research that has been on how individual politicians and political parties deploy social media for political communication in elections, highlights the

use of social media by an unaffiliated female activist, to bring an unfulfilled election campaign promise to the attention of Ugandans. She uses Facebook to highlight the weaknesses of elected politicians and as a way to de-campaign them.

The Pads4Girls campaign was a social cause aimed at addressing a social problem. It was, however, founded on what its architects considered to be political manipulation. There is hope that social media campaigns such as Pads4Girls can mobilise women to be more active and more politically conscious about what is going on in Uganda. The Facebook messages drew readers' attention to an unfulfilled political promise made during the election campaign. Findings suggest that even though women may not directly aspire to elected positions, they do follow the elections and take note of what political candidates communicate during campaigns. The architects of Pads4Girls regard social media as a powerful and timely tool in facilitating the political and social activism of issues involving genuine societal needs. Pads4Girls showed ordinary people, particularly women, that it was possible to successfully employ social media to confront political leaders and hold them accountable. Social media is therefore a mode of social and political communication that is as significant as conventional media. A female activist directly challenged elected politicians via Facebook and got them to respond in subtle and direct ways. Facebook is, therefore, transforming how women engage and communicate with authorities and with politicians. The findings of this study emphasise the notion that social media is driving the power of the media away from established institutions and regulated authorities, into the hands of society (Branson, 2012).

Pads4Girls also points to the importance of combining online and offline activism. The Facebook posts relating to the campaign were widely read (based on likes, comments and shares). It was, however, the offline activities such as appearances in the mainstream media, meetings, visits and the distribution of menstrual hygiene materials in schools that made the campaign visible and more meaningful. This research presents an example of online political and social debate that was taken into affected communities, so impacting society and contributing to the improvement of education. There was, however, no *slactivism* in this campaign, as Morozov opined about online political activities replacing offline activities. The Pads4Girls campaign serves as a good example of online and offline activities complementing and reinforcing each other to critique, rally and mobilise people and funds and distribute menstrual hygiene materials.

The campaign was largely regarded as successful. We must, however, note that it only lasted for 21 days and then stopped. One of the reasons it stopped was because the government made it difficult to continue to mobilise and distribute pads. Stella was, suspended from her job, barred from flying out of the country, and was eventually arrested. Thus, the success of social media civic initiatives including political campaigning depends on the goodwill of the political establishment in which they are deployed. The achievements of Pads4Girls, followed by its unceremonious shutdown, can be attributed to the political, social and economic conditions in Ugandan society. Politicians, for example, take advantage of the poor by making promises such as providing free menstrual hygiene facilities. The poor economic conditions are, however, the reason why the Pads4Girls campaign gained so much online and offline support. The most important result of the campaign, however, perhaps is that it stirred citizens and showed many women what a powerful tool speaking out and mobilising can be. The long-term effects of this are yet to be seen.

Acronyms

CID Criminal Investigations Department

DP Democratic Party

FB Facebook

FDC Forum for Democratic Change

MHM Menstrual Hygiene Management

UN United Nations

Interview:

Sheillah Nyanzi, Pads4Girls Campaign's lead strategist, Kampala 15 November 2018.

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ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/stella.nyanzi/posts/10155002229535053> accessed 12.10.2018

^{iv} Internet World Stats: At <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm> accessed 09.01.2017.

^v Protest against the rising cost of living in April 2011.

^{vi} It is deemed the first social media election in Uganda's history. See <http://www.voanews.com/a/social-media-young-voices-uganda-election-campaign/3195260.html>. Accessed 30.09.2016.

^{vii} <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/may/28/menstruation-girls-education-uganda-sanitation> accessed 12.10.2018

^{viii} Presidential handshake is regarded in Uganda as corruption.

^{ix} <https://www.gofundme.com/padsforuganda>

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