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Opposed by men and rejected by women: the dilemma of male gender equality activists in Malawi

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Abstract Gender Equality Activism (GEA) encapsulates actions and strategies taken by people or groups to promote the equality of rights and opportunities between men and women (Stake, 2007). Little is known about men's engagement with GEA, particularly in Malawi, a country which promotes men's participation. Against this background, this paper discusses the motivations and barriers to men's participation in GEA in the Southern African country. The research is drawn from a qualitative study that broadly investigated men's experiences in GEA. Four men and three women, who are all gender equality activists, participated in this study. The findings do not only contribute to the limited knowledge on men's participation in GEA, but also expands the scope of application for the masculinity theories that underpin the study.

Key words: Gender Equality, Gender Equality Activism, Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinities, Patriarchal Dividend

Introduction

To attain gender equality, substantive actions are required, one of which is Gender Equality Activism (GEA). GEA consists of the strategies and initiatives by individuals or groups to bring about political or social change with a view to attain equality of rights and opportunities between women and men (Chattopadhyay, 2004; Stake, 2007; Gilbertson, 2018; Connell, 2005). For a long time, GEA initiatives have been associated with women such that gender equality, which is GEA's ultimate outcome, has been conflated with women (Reeves & Baden, 2000;

Barker, 2000; Chattopadhyay, 2004). On the other hand, men's participation in GEA has been observed to be low partly because men's behaviors and attitudes, which are underpinned by patriarchy, are widely problematized as a stumbling block to gender equality (Cornwall & White, 2000; Kimmel, 2005, Stake, 2007; Casey & Smith, 2010; Conlin & Heesacker, 2018).

Recently, nuanced thinking is reshaping GEA as men's position is being redefined to consider them not as enemies but as partners whose advantaged status is an opportunity for the advancement of gender equality (Bojin, 2012). Against this background, this research investigates the influencing factors for men's participation in Gender Equality Activism, which is an understudied area in Malawi. The research was motivated by my personal experience as one of the few men who are involved in gender equality work in Malawi. In Malawi, women not only drive GEA initiatives and activities, but they are also the majority of participants, in comparison to men. The search for answers and evidence to understand the factors that influence the few men who participate in GEA is the reason this research was undertaken. To achieve this, a qualitative approach was pursued in which interviews with four male and three female Gender Equality Activists in Malawi were conducted.

Context

Malawi is a Southern African country with a population of 17,563,749 people comprising 8,521,460 males and 9,042,289 females (NSO, 2019). It is one of the countries with progressive legislation on gender equality (MoGCDSW, 2019). It is party to most of the key international and regional instruments on gender equality such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the SADC Gender and Development Protocol, among others. At country level, these instruments have been domesticated into laws and policies including the constitution, the gender equality act and the national gender policy, among other pieces of legislation. These laws and policies provide a conducive environment for gender equality and gender equality activism, although no law or policy exists that specifically encourages men to participate in Gender Equality Activism. Furthermore, the existence of these laws and policies has not substantially reduced gender inequalities, which are still deep and wide in Malawi. For instance, only 65.9% of women are literate compared to 71.6% of men, only 23.3% of women are in decision making positions, and 41% of women experience either physical or sexual violence in comparison to 3% of men in Malawi (NSO, 2019; MoGCDSW, 2019). Because of this, Malawi ranks low, on number 142 out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index thus reflecting gender-based inequalities in areas of reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity (UNDP, 2020).

Literature Review: Gender, masculinity, and Gender Equality Activism

According to Connell, gender involves the configuration of power relations between men and women in the context of socio-cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender differs from sex in that the former describes the way

in which the social practice in terms of what men and women do is ordered, while the latter relates to the biological characteristics which define humans as female or male (Connell, 1995). Gender helps us in understanding the different ways in which femininity and masculinity are valued. For instance, femininity, which describes the social expectations about how women should behave (ibid), is less valued than masculinity. This is because the attributes like nurturance and empathy, which are attributed to femininity, are associated with weakness and subordination to masculinity (Flood & Pease, 2005).

Defining masculinity, Connell states that it is the configuration of gender practices associated with the position of men in a structure of gender relations (2003, 2005, and 2014). The construction of masculinity is influenced by patriarchy which socialises men to be considered superior and to dominate over women (Ruxton & van der Gaag, 2013). The advantage and expectation of benefits that men have which serves to maintain an unequal gender order is called the patriarchal dividend (Flood & Pease, 2005; Connell, 2014). Worth noting is that although masculine ideals are institutionalized through different structures, these are not simply adopted by boys and men, who negotiate with, and often contest, these norms throughout their lives (Forde, 2014). This is why masculinity is diverse; its patterns differ from one culture to another and in every culture multiple forms of masculinity exist (Connell, 1995; 2005; 2008). This prompts the use of the plural form to emphasize the multiplicity of masculinities and how they can change over time.

Masculinities in the Malawian Context

Connell (1995) postulates that in any culture there is hegemonic masculinity, a dominant type of masculinity which is idealized. It represents the most currently honoured masculinity which occupies the position of centrality in a structure of gender relations and whose privileged position helps to stabilize the gender order, especially the subordination of women (Connell, 2014, p. 6). Although hegemonic masculinity legitimizes patriarchy, it is only enacted by a few men, and at times may not exist at all (Connell, 2003). In Western societies, a straight, heterosexual and middle-class white male with characteristics of toughness, aggression and dominance over women is the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2008). These characteristics are also indicative of hegemonic masculinity in Malawi. In vernacular, *mwamuna* is a term that is used to describe the traits of an ideal man who is heterosexual, married and with a stable income, among other attributes (Hayes, 2013; Kapulula, 2015). *Mwamuna* is tough, physically strong, aggressive, violent and does not easily give up (Kapulula, 2015; NCA, 2016). A local adage *mwamuna salira*, which literary means 'a man does not cry' is a standard measure of manliness in Malawian culture. These traits are instilled in men through socialization agents like initiation ceremonies (Hayes, 2013).

While hegemonic masculinity relates to cultural dominance, Connell argues that this is contrasted not only with femininity but also with how it relates to complicit, marginalized, and protest masculinities (1995, 2005). A gender hierarchy is thus created among men, in which particular groups inhabit positions of power and wealth, while others occupy a position of subordination (Forde, 2014). Elucidating complicity, Connell (1995) states that these are masculinities which are constructed in ways that 'realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy' (p.79). These are the forms of

masculinity which do not challenge hegemonic masculinity because they directly or indirectly benefit from the patriarchal dividend. On the other hand, marginalized masculinities exist in societies where race and class are the ordering features of social life (Connell, 1995). This is the type of masculinity that cannot conform or derive the benefits from hegemonic masculinity, and it is enacted by men from minority groups and lower socio-economic classes (Connell, 2014). These men are marginalized due to, among other things, lack of financial opportunities and institutionalized racism (Ibid). Although race and class are not so pronounced in Malawi, marginalized masculinity can be linked to social status such as low income, tribe, and conditions like disability and unemployment. Men who belong to these groups are marginalized because they are seen as not portraying the dominance that characterizes hegemony.

Furthermore, Connell identifies protest masculinity. This type of masculinity is enacted by marginalised men as they attempt to compensate for their subordinate status by defying hegemonic masculinity and constructing alternative forms of masculinity (Connell, 2000 in Forde, 2014). More complex than merely adhering to a stereotyped male role reworked in the context of poverty, protest masculinity can be accompanied by respect for women and egalitarian views about the sexes and affection for children, which are perceived as feminine attributes (Connell, 1995). Any claims to power central to hegemonic masculinity are nullified by socio-economic weakness. Some men also construct positive alternatives to the hegemonic model, such as those who repudiate masculine norms (Connell, 1995). In Malawi, men who participate in programmes like reproductive health, whereby they escort their wives to access maternal services and take part in caring for children, would be deemed to enact protest masculinity (Aarnio, et al., 2009). This is a means of challenging the traditional beliefs of 'true manhood', which are associated with violence and aggressive behaviours. The social construction of gender and masculinity as described above has implications for men's participation in GEA.

Gender Equality Activism

Gender Equality Activism, as previously defined, is carried out through different strategies. One of the strategies is 'Male Champions of Change'. This is a strategy that is used to engage influential male leaders to take action in promoting gender equality through the redefinition of men's roles (MCC, 2020; Nolan & Hornbrook, 2019). This strategy is similar to the UN Women championed movement 'HeForShe' which also engages various groups of influential men to advance gender equality (Chisiza, 2019). Another strategy is 'SASA'; a Ugandan initiative which engages communities, especially men, to challenge social norms that promote violence against women and HIV/AIDS (Raising Voices, 2020). GEA also includes campaigns like '16 days of Activism against Gender-based Violence', which are used to call for prevention and elimination of violence against women (Connell, 2005; United Nations, 2020). Despite their foreign origins, these strategies have also been adopted for use in GEA in Malawi (Chisiza, 2019; MoGCDSW, 2019, MenEngage, 2020)

Men's participation in Gender Equality Activism is essential, not only to the attainment of gender equality, but also for the lives of men, their families and communities in general. (Chanta & Gutmann, 2002, Conlin & Heesacker, 2018). According to Ruxton and van der Gaag (2013), countries with the highest levels of men's participation in GEA are also highest in the World

Economic Forum's gender gap index (ie, they rank highly because their gender gap is small), compared to those with low levels of men's involvement in gender equality. It is further stated that men can contribute towards the development of a more gender equitable society because their participation promotes a culture of respect for human rights which helps in building a society in which both men and women are treated equally, thus ensuring peaceful coexistence (Kaufman, 2003; Kimmel, 2005, Scambor, et al., 2014). Jalmert (2003) further promulgates that GEA helps men to realize their vulnerability to the hegemonic masculinity script which leads to negative outcomes such as contracting diseases, early deaths and high rates of suicide. Not only this, the awareness that comes with participation in GEA also helps men to adopt less violent behaviors because they understand the negative effects of toxic masculinities on their lives and those around them (Flood, 2011; Ruxton & van der Gaag, 2013; Scambor, et al., 2014). GEA therefore helps men to develop positive relationships with women, thus reducing the risks and harm that come as a result of unhealthy relationships.

In spite of these benefits, men's participation in GEA is low and this is attributed to a number of factors and issues. In her study, Connell (2005) observes that men do not participate in GEA because of fear of losing the patriarchal dividend. This is on the basis that GEA activities challenge the existing patriarchal order which benefits men more than women. In Europe, Ruxton & van der Gaag (2013) found that men do not participate in GEA because of fear of reprisals from society as they are seen not to conform to the masculine ideals. Moreover, it is also stated that some men do not participate in GEA because of the names that such activities use in different contexts. In the United States for example, Kaufman (2003), found that GEA activities are conflated with feminism; a terminology which men are not comfortable with, stating that it is stigmatizing on their part.

Considering the contextual nature of masculinities and gender equality issues, evidence on men's participation in different contexts, especially in developing countries like Malawi, is critical. However, Connell (2014) and Gilbertson (2018) observe that such evidence is difficult to obtain from developing countries because fewer studies have been conducted. Much of what has been documented largely presents the experiences of men's participation in GEA from the Western perspective (Connell, 2014). Gilbertson (2018) states that:

We therefore know little about how and why men in the Global South get involved in gender [equality activism], how they view gender equality, and the assumptions that underpin efforts to engage men and boys (pp.2-3).

For this reason, this study is imperative because of its contribution to the limited knowledge on men's participation in developing countries. The focus on Malawi is unique in so far as evidence is concerned, as no study of this sort has been conducted and men's participation in GEA is actively promoted in Malawi.

Methodology

In conducting this study, a qualitative approach was used. This method was preferred because of the space it provides to the researcher to share in the understandings and experiences of

others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (Gill, et al., 2008). The research also used semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data on men's participation in GEA. The interviews helped in providing rich sources of data on how people account for their experiences (Stewart et al., 2008). In addition, the flexibility of the in-depth interviews allows for the discovery of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the researcher (Gill, et al., 2008, p. 291). For this reason, gender experts who have valuable knowledge and experience on the subject were interviewed using an interview guide incorporating open ended questions focusing on the study.

Participants

Purposive sampling strategy, also known as judgmental sampling, was used to select seven participants comprising of four men and three women to take part in the study. The seven were Gender Experts working with government and non-governmental organizations in Malawi. Purposive sampling helped in ensuring that those with relevant knowledge and experience participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 32 to 59 years while their experience in GEA in Malawi spanned from 8 to 25 years. All the participants were holders of master's degrees as their highest qualification. The diversity in age and experience was particularly useful as it helped in gathering multiple perspectives on the subject under investigation.

Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the data that was collected through interviews, this study used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data which involves the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns or themes within data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi, et al., 2013). In this case, data from interviews which were audio recorded were transcribed verbatim. An analytical framework with codes and subcodes emerging from literature and data was developed to help in data analysis.

Findings

Motivations for men's participation in gender equality activism in Malawi

The findings of the study revealed that there is a plethora of factors that motivate men to participate in Gender Equality Activism. The male participants pointed out personal experiences of violence, as either witnesses or victims, as one of the reasons for their participation in GEA. One male respondent said that:

I grew up in a family where I witnessed my mother being battered and abused by my father until she decided to live on her own. This affected me because I eventually ended up being raised by a single mother (IH).

Additionally, it was revealed in the study that some men also become Gender Equality Activists because they have girl children whom they do not want to live in a world where there is violence and inequalities. One male participant said that:

'When I understood what gender inequality does and because I have a girl child; I think about the kind of future that I am creating for her' (SI).

On the other hand, the study also revealed that some men participate in GEA because they were once victims of violence. It is when such men open up and receive support that they participate in GEA in order to inspire other male victims to come forward. One female respondent remarked that:

These [men] say, if I suffered like this, how many men are also suffering outside there? I mean men who are suffering in silence who do not know that they have spaces where they can seek help (EK).

Furthermore, the study found that men also participate in GEA because they want to be different from the majority of men who do not support gender equality. The male respondents reported that they are motivated to become involved in GEA because they want to be part of the solution to ending gender inequalities instead of being among those who resist or promote inequalities. However, the female respondents observed that some men participate in GEA simply because gender issues are now trending in Malawi, and as such they do not want to be seen as those who are backward.

Barriers impeding men's participation in gender equality activism in Malawi

The study found a number of factors that prevent men from participating in Gender Equality Activism. Most of the male respondents stated that misconceptions about gender equality is one reason they are discouraged from participating in GEA. It was found that gender equality is considered a foreign concept, intended to disrupt the patriarchal system, hence taking away the rights and privileges of men. Furthermore, both male and female respondents reported that stereotypes towards men who are gender equality activists also act as a barrier to men's involvement in GEA. The male respondents revealed that because of their participation in GEA, they are called names like '*chili pa akazi*' or '*wopepera*', which imply that they are not man enough. A female respondent concurred and stated that:

At times these men (Gender Equality Activists) are laughed at by their fellow men who I have heard asking: 'are these men foolish? How can they be doing these things for women?' (EK)

Linked to the stereotypes, the study also found that another barrier to men's participation in GEA is the dilemma of male gender activists in Malawi as belonging to groups of neither men nor women. The respondents reported that male gender equality activists face problems from fellow men because they challenge the beliefs and norms that give them privilege as a group in society. On the other hand, respondents stated that the male activists are not trusted by female activists who think that men are intruding in their space or coming to take over a women's agenda. SI, one of the male respondents said:

The female activists do not really trust us as partners who want to bring about meaningful change. They think we are not sincere and that we cannot positively contribute towards gender equality because we do not experience the problems that women experience (SI).

Discussion

Men and Gender Equality Activism in Malawi: Challenging or reinforcing hegemony?

The myriad of factors constituting men's motivations for participating in GEA reveal two main perspectives. Firstly, participation in GEA is considered by men as a way of challenging hegemony in the context of masculinity in Malawi. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant type of masculinity that is idealized in every society and is influenced by patriarchal socialization (Connell, 1995). The social construction of hegemony idealises men's dominance over women and promotes violent and aggressive behaviours (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Participation in GEA demands men to embody characteristics that challenge hegemonic masculine ideals. As the findings indicate, men who become gender equality activists are supposed to condemn violence against women, report when they experience violence, and demonstrate that they are caring, loving and family people. These attributes sharply contradict and challenge the traditional expectations of an ideal man who is aggressive, violent and tough (Connell, 1995). These new traits that men who become gender equality activists are expected to display are in line with the characteristics associated with subordinated masculinities, as well as some protest masculinities. In this regard, men's participation in GEA can be seen by male activists as a means of developing new forms of masculinity to challenge those that are hegemonic.

Secondly, the underlying assumptions behind the motivations for men's involvement in GEA can be seen as men's silent way of reinforcing hegemony. In this regard, gender equality activism is a means of retaining men's privilege while promoting the subordination of women. This is a manifestation of complicit masculinities as argued by Connell (1995) and Forde (2014). By participating in GEA, men benefit from the patriarchal dividend as they retain power and status to themselves. For instance, when men show their support for women or come out as former victims or perpetrators, they are glorified and celebrated; a scenario which contradicts women's involvement. Men are seen as heroes and are rewarded, while women are not celebrated to the same extent for their participation in gender equality activism. Therefore, GEA is but a means through which men retain power and privilege through the advancement of issues that relate to women's lives in which they are glorified while subordinating women. This agrees with Mwiine (2019) who noted that the dispensation of gender equality has not effectively challenged men's power and privilege.

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From the foregoing discussion, the findings further indicate the dilemma that male gender equality activists are confronted with in Malawi. By enacting traits and characteristics that are contrary to the dominant traits, male gender equality activists are often emasculated by their fellow men for departing from the ideals and expectations of an ideal man. They are discriminated against by fellow men for associating themselves with women. Similar findings were also recorded in studies from other accounts, which echo the existing literature on the challenges that inhibit men's involvement in GEA (Funk, 2008; Casey & Smith, 2010; Conlin & Heesacker, 2018).

On the other hand, the findings also indicate that men who become involved in gender equality activism face particular challenges from female activists who are supposed to be their partners or allies in striving to achieve gender equality. Men who are involved in GEA are not trusted by women who despise them because they are not capable of understanding the challenges that

women face, and hence not considered fit to be promoters of gender equality. This echoes Kimmel's (2005) argument about men's involvement in gender equality issues in which he observed that hostility from women is one drawback that affects men. Bojin (2012) further asserts that men are objectified by women because they are perceived to be in need of 'transformation' in order to become gender equality activists. She goes on to argue that as subjects, women are the initiators, change makers and the driving force of gender equality. For this reason, the male respondents stated that to be trusted, they need to prove over a period of time that they are indeed genuinely passionate about gender equality. On their part, the female gender equality activists stated that men need to be vetted and monitored before they are recognized as activists for gender equality. According to the female respondents, this is to prevent men from taking over their space and advancing their own patriarchal agenda. Mwiine (2019) raises similar concerns as she argues that, without careful consideration, men's participation in GEA strips women of their agency and power.

Conclusion

Men's participation in Gender Equality Activism is important to the attainment of gender equality in Malawi. As such, an understanding of the motivations and barriers to men's involvement in GEA is key. The results of the research indicate that participation in GEA is used by some men as a means of challenging hegemony. This is reflected in the behaviors and characteristics that men who are involved in GEA are required to enact. Their solidarity with women, caring for children and openness to declare that they were once victims of abuse are traits which are not considered part of the hegemonic masculine order. For men who become gender equality activists, enacting these traits is a way of challenging the dominant masculinities through the introduction of new behaviors which echo elements of protest masculinities (Connell, 1995). On the other hand, GEA is also seen as a way of reinforcing hegemony and male dominance over women. GEA provides a means for some men to invade a space that is considered the preserve of women. It is in these spaces that men continue to be celebrated as heroes and champions for advancing gender equality of which they are equal beneficiaries as women. Therefore, women feel disempowered because through participation in GEA, men do not only retain privilege and power to themselves, but also continue to maintain dominance over women.

The findings also show that gender equality activism can be a source of tension and conflict among men and between men and women. Men who become involved in activism are emasculated and stereotyped by fellow men who associate gender equality with women. Amongst their fellow men, the male gender equality activists are also side-lined and belittled because their actions do not portray traits of real men. On the other hand, men who participate in GEA also face opposition and rejection from women. Instead of considering them as partners, they are not trusted and are not considered transformed enough to promote gender equality. Therefore, the male activists have to prove their sincerity and commitment to gender equality which is often doubted and questioned by women. This leaves men who participate in GEA in suspense as they neither belong to groups of men nor groups of women, hence they are isolated.

Recommendations

This research has delved into the motivations and barriers to men's participation in Gender Equality Activism in Malawi from the perspectives of male and female gender experts. The study findings point to a number of things that need to be done in order to ensure men's participation in Gender Equality Activism in Malawi. To address issues of isolation among men, there is need for spaces where men who are Gender Equality Activists can use as platforms for sharing experiences, mentorship and reflection. In addition, there is a need for nuanced conversations on gender equality among men and women in order to address the misconceptions on gender equality which the study revealed as one of the key gaps. This can also be addressed through awareness and sensitization on gender equality issues. Additionally, to address issues of mistrust on the genuineness of male gender equality activists' participation in GEA, there is need to establish mechanisms for testing and validating their commitment and passion to gender equality. This can be done through established forums such as Men For Gender Equality, as is the case in other countries.

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Joseph holds a Bachelor of Social Work from Malawi (2010) and an MA in Gender, Globalization and Rights from National University of Ireland, Galway (2020). Joseph is also an Alumni of several regional and international institutions that provide professional training in Gender Mainstreaming such as JICA (Japan), IDEP (Senegal) and ITEC (India).