

Intersecting Feminism and Communication: Implications for Social Integration and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Over the years, women in Nigeria, and indeed across the globe have been subjected to discrimination, bias and exclusion based solely on their gender and backed by culture; and androcentrism has ensured the reproduction of a belief system that normalises gender inequality. Feminism and feminist discourse has however ushered in an era of exposure to how harmful and counter-productive these practices can be. From the rejection of Bills that seek to promote the inclusion of women, to the widespread unacceptance of feminist philosophy, Nigeria seems to be unaware of the inherent benefits of gender equality and the need to promote it. This paper focuses on the interplay between feminism, communication and culture; and identifies the existing communication campaigns aimed at incorporating a culture of gender equality in Nigeria. It adopts the qualitative approach to analyze available data on how these seeming unrelated concepts have been adopted by social change agents in the attempt to champion social justice and inclusion, having shown the importance of communication and the need for an intersection between feminism and communication. Drawing inference from feminist communication theory, the study seeks to identify current communication campaigns and strategies by industry partners to promote gender equality. The paper concludes that very little communication strategies have been employed despite of the many campaigns launched, and more people still view gender equality negatively. The paper recommends approaches to intersect the concepts for maximal benefits, as well as the need to involve communication experts for effective results.

Introduction

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the United Nations (UN) is to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls. According to the UN's SDG Report for 2022, at the current pace, it will take 40 years for women and men to be represented equally in national political leadership positions, global employment and job loss, and ability to make informed decisions on sex and reproduction. Prior to this report, statistics show that Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product could grow higher if women participate in the labour force at same rate as men. The above are indicators that feminism

should be a priority for any nation that intends to attain sustainable growth and development, and as Mueller cited in UN Women (2022) puts it, Nigeria will lose out on effecting social and economic growth if women's rights are not protected.

Gender equality may sound like a widely accepted concept, especially in Europe and North America, given the amount of literature that has culminated into feminism in theory and practice today. In contrast however, feminism remains controversial in African socio-cultural space, as many people associate it with westernisation and an attempt at recolonisation. In agreement, Falola (2021) notes the erroneous equation of feminism with misandry and how some agenda seekers like to think of feminism as negative hence, the need to reject it and focus on the Nigerian cultural practice of inequality. Eke (2021) submits that structures such as family, political and economic institutions are shaped and created through culture, and within the Nigerian context, patriarchy is at the foundation of our culture, and has established a belief system that supports and promotes the superiority of men. She called for deliberate conversation and action planning within the family, organisational and government structures on how to change cultural mindsets and create an inclusive institutional culture. This undoubtedly aligns with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should all be Feminists* recommendation: "Culture does not make people, people make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture." This submission by Adichie easily comes to mind when seeking a rationale for this study. Indeed, the effects of gender inequality cannot be denied – from the uneven distribution in political and corporate appointments, unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, parents preferring (if they had to) to send their boys to school over the girls, to child marriages and the denial of inheritance and access to husband's properties for daughters and wives respectively. This therefore calls for deliberate action against gender inequality, a move that has been embarked on by so many change drivers and industry partners. The question however is: how well have the SDG 5 been pursued, and are these programs attaining their goals of bringing an end to gender inequality in Nigeria?

According to Jackson and Jones (1998), one of the foundations upon which feminist theory is laid is the challenging of what is called knowledge, in an androcentric world. They note that there is a danger of perpetrating the same faults that men are criticised for, by pushing only a particular narrative and representing only some factions of the entire women population, seeing that women are not a homogenous group, and their differences must be of social significance. Similarly, Davies (1994) calls for the homogenisation and delimitation of feminism to particular locations and cultural experiences, and the continual renegotiation of identities between places and nations so that black feminism, for instance,

cannot become stratified to one particular history or set of preoccupations. This indicates the need to name, place and historicise where one is speaking from and to whom. Hence, this paper focuses on the intersection of feminism, communication and culture for the attainment of maximal benefits in Nigeria. Have specific programs been tailored in Nigeria for Nigerians, or are there only umbrella campaigns that are more or less handed down from international organisations? It focuses on the interplay between the mentioned concepts and how these seeming different fields of study could work together to redefine social integration and inclusion for the women and girls, towards sustainable development.

Intersectional Feminism: The Communication Imperative

The term intersectional feminism is used to explain how the feminist movement can be more diverse and inclusive. Trying to justify the concept, Dastagir (2017) writes that if feminism is advocating for women's rights and equality between the sexes, intersectional feminism is an understanding of how women's overlapping identities including race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination. This author provides an example of how a black woman is disadvantaged by both her race and her gender and suggests that gender justice is economic justice. Intersectional feminism means not focusing solely on broadening conversations to reflect the peculiarity of groups of women and in the case of Nigeria and identifying gender inequality as a cultural construct which has succeeded in holding women back for ages.

The following is a collection of how feminist scholars define intersectionality:

1. Juliet Williams, Professor of Gender Studies, UCLA sees intersectional feminism as especially important because many women are confronting multiple forms of vulnerability. In her opinion, there is a real danger that feminism itself can function in an exclusionary manner by marginalizing less powerful and less privileged women and allies – the very people who mostly need feminism today. For her, intersectional feminism is a form of feminism that stands for the rights and empowerment of all women, taking seriously the fact of difference among women, including different identities based on economic status, nationality, religion and language. It attends to the ways in which claims made in the name of women as a class can function to silence or marginalise some women by universalising the claims of relatively privileged women.
2. Nancy J. Hirschmann views intersectional feminism as the idea that 'gender' or 'women' does not just refer to a single unified concept; all women have a race, class, religion, ethnicity, and unique experience.
3. Ruth Enid Zambrana opines that there isn't just one feminism, there are feminisms. Intersectionalism is crucial as gender is not a single category. "There is

need to acknowledge underrepresented women and domestic groups that have different histories and are at tremendous disadvantage”.

Having explained intersectionality and identified the need to personalise feminisms, it is important to note that the factors that differentiate women and call for intersectionality are usually religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, class and economic status. These factors can equally make up the culture of a given people and how their unique identities can either become privileges or barriers. Since it is improper, even impossible to classify all women as one and propose same theories and practices in the bid to end gender inequality, it is also futile to expect that similar approaches in terms of communication and scholarship can be useful. There are individual differences among groups and even within them, there are also selective processes in communication that determine acceptance and practice. According to the International Women’ Development Agency (IWDA, 2018), the purpose of intersectional feminism is to recognize how different aspects of a person’s identity might interact to change the way they experience the world – and the barriers they might face as a result. It helps to better understand how different forms of marginalisation can deepen and amplify each other to create unique vulnerabilities, ones that cannot be addressed through singular, universal solutions. It is through this recognition that we can become more critical of how we view the systems of power that we are trying to change and be more targeted in the ways we seek to further gender equality. In effect, intersectionality in feminism research provides for the recognition of the differences, histories and cultural practices of women and an understanding of how these variables can affect outcomes. Despite these incessant calls for intersectionality and the need for women across the world to speak for themselves to avoid being misrepresented and classified with other categories of women, there is a dearth of scholarly literature on Nigerian feminism and this poses a serious concern. To effectively represent women, there is a need for targeted communication strategies which focus on creating content for Nigerians.

Feminist Communication Theory

Instead of designing the communication curriculum around the theories, research and experiences of those who are white and those who are men, let us then design our programs around the theories, research, experiences and communication needs of the majority of the world’s inhabitants - those who are women and those who are people of colour... universities must become those places where what is taken for granted is examined and critiqued, where questions are raised about what should be retained from the past and what is in need of change, where the future can be imagined as a consequence of paths taken and not taken. The study of communication should be central to this enterprise of inquiry and imagination. (Wackwitz & Rakow, 2004).

The whole idea behind the feminist communication theory is the questioning of what is referred to as knowledge and the process of knowing. It tends to challenge and repudiate traditional communication theory which feminists argue is controlled by men and capable of reproducing and transmitting anti-feminist content. The opinion here is that there are multiple grounds upon which gender-based marginalisation is perpetrated and reproduced; communication and the control and ownership of the means of communicating is one of them. This invariably calls for the challenging of the structures upon which gender discriminations and exclusions are being framed. There has to be a clear redefinition of what is understood as communication and culture within the Nigerian framework, to reflect intentional and deliberate action. According to Bachmann and Proust (2020), communication as a discipline is still very masculine-dominant and defined by Anglo-centric and Euro-centric ways of representing knowledge. This suggests that media studies neglects how media functions in the empowerment of Black African women, for instance.

The submissions above underscore the need to consider communication in feminism intersectionalism; so that while paying attention to ethnicity, religion, class, nationality and race, care is taken to design communication along those lines. Communication plays an important role in how marginalisation is normalised and reinforced, which is why widening the scope of feminist communication research is advantageous. According to Bachmann and Proust (2020), with feminist communication research, locationality is prioritised.

Feminist Communication Campaigns in Nigeria

On feminist communication in Nigeria, the following campaigns have been identified and their activities analysed:

1. The United Nations #PromoteMySister Campaign which was launched on the 2nd of August, 2022 through the United Nations' Population Fund (UNFPA), an agency focused on gender based issues. This campaign aims at strengthening and empowering women, as well as accelerating gender equality in Nigeria.
2. The Government of Nigeria and the United Nations Generation Equality Campaign is a joint effort launched on the 8th of November 2020 and an offshoot of the UN Women Global Generation Equality Campaign launched on the 6th of May, 2019 in New York. The campaign demands equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, equal pay for work of equal value, equal participation in political life and decision making in all areas of life, end to all forms of violence against women and girls, end to sexual harassment, and healthcare services that respond

to the needs of all females. For this campaign, mentorship, intergenerational dialogue and exchange are critical components, with the aim of strengthening the leadership capacity of young women as well as support them and the agenda to build a more gender-equal Nigeria.

3. HeForShe Campaign is a global movement which aims to engage one billion men and boys on gender equality. It is an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality. It started in 2015 with the UN but was launched in Nigeria in 2017. The HeForShe Campaign website displays that it has over two million activists in the community, three billion conversations on social media every year and six hundred million citizens represented by their global partners.

A critical look at the campaigns and the launch of their activities reveals that they involve government officials, UN representatives and individual partners who can easily be referred to as elite, based on their level of education and social standing. There is no clear visible attempt to incorporate rural, uneducated women and girls in these campaigns. This suggests an exclusion of low class, less privileged women, who should in fact be a major target audience for these campaigns. Williams cited in Dastagir (2019) emphasises the need for empowerment for all women taking note of their differences in identity, economic status, and I must add, educational background. The women and girls at the grassroots who are arguably the biggest recipients of gender inequality are not directly considered. The campaigns have websites, are relatively visible on social media, with social media usage increasing regularly. However, it is still important that non-digital mediated approaches be adopted to ensure that the target audience is effectively reached.

The major media for feminist communication are social media. Most key players in the activism for gender equality have a competitive social media presence and arguably low presence off social media. This is especially visible in the inability of many women to attend physical functions and partake of the campaign activities. Both individual and corporate (governmental and non-governmental) partners have whole conversations on social media and meet periodically for their offline activities, which are also communicated via social media. The implication of this is that just like in the campaigns above, there is a danger of systematically leaving out a demography of Nigerian women from an activity that primarily should focus on them.

There is a high presence of individual feminists and groups who use social media to showcase their work and bring to light the realities of the Nigerian woman. In the frontline, we have *The Feminist Coalition* whose members use both the corporate front and their

individual identities to create social media content and design messages targeted at their specific audience. Although, most of these content face a series of backlash and criticism, their contribution to feminist communication on social and traditional media cannot be ignored. The same can be said about social media groups like *Females In Nigeria* whose major focus is to give women a voice and an enabling environment to tell their stories, without fear of being judged, while also empowering them to be agents of change in their communities.

The role of effective communication for development and attitude change cannot be over-emphasised; *Development Communication* is a branch of communication which focuses on championing such discourses. According to The World Bank (2004), development communication is the integration of strategic communication in development projects. Strategic communication strives for behaviour change through information dissemination, education and awareness raising. Meaningful communication involves getting information out of particular audiences, listening to feedback and responding appropriately. Development communication also aims to build consensus by generating informed dialogue among stakeholders and raising public understanding. Aside having social media pages which encourage feedback, the campaigns listed above have no clear modes of operation that the public can at least access. This invariably means there is no feedback mechanism with which the partners can measure success or failure.

Similarly the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2014) identifies thirteen elements of a state of the art communication strategy. These are: introduction; background and context; vision; purpose/objectives; target audience; key messages; channels; tactics; messengers; implementation plan; available resources; monitoring, learning and evaluation; and managing expectations and risks. These key elements go a long way in determining whether a communication campaign or strategy will achieve its aims. Communication is the nucleus of national development and development communication aims at bringing systematic social change. It has similar functions as traditional communication which include human empowerment, capacity building and consensus building.

Conclusion

Having noted the need for intersectionality and looked at the campaigns above, the following questions arise: have the uniqueness of Nigerian women been considered in the designing of these campaigns; and have effective communication strategies been adopted? The answer is in the negative. A significant number of Nigerian women are uneducated, earn low-income and unable to afford digital technologies, hence, have no access to social

media which is the major media for these campaigns. Using an intersectional lens also means recognizing the historical contexts surrounding issues. Long histories and systematic discrimination have created deep inequalities that intersect with each other to deny people of their rights and disadvantage them. It is pertinent therefore to involve communication experts even amongst feminist scholars and in the mainstream media, who may not have any control over media content, but are willing to lend their scholarship, expertise and voices towards intersecting feminism and communication. It is important to recognise that waves of feminism and activism have had far reaching effects, but have not completely established feminism as the culture of Nigeria for Nigerians, hence, the need to intersect concepts for efficiency.

It is impossible to miss the active role the UN has played in the bid to actualise gender equality. From setting an SDG that focuses on feminism, to creating room for the development of active institutions that aim to achieve the Goals, and then actively championing campaigns and collaborations towards SDG 5. However, effective communication approaches are invaluable for improved coordination and teamwork to manage such development programs. According to the UN Women Africa (2020), women and girls make up more than half of the Nigerian population, but still do not have sufficient access nor opportunities to realise their full potentials as agents of change. In order for Nigeria to attain Sustainable Development Goal Five, a holistic approach that engages all women as stakeholders is critical. Similarly, World Bank (2004) notes that well-conceived, professionally implemented communication programs that are tied directly to reform efforts or development projects that bring understanding of social and cultural realities to bear in the design of programs can make the difference between a project's success and failure. To this end, it is important that communication experts be part of such campaigns and programs if attaining set goals and objectives is the expectation.

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