

Blogging to be heard: Zimbabwe's women take back the tech

By [Fungai Machirori](#)

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[\[16 Days of Activism\]](#) It was when one of my news articles - on male circumcision - returned with track changes substituting the word "penis" with "male organ" that I decided that I would have to rethink my strategy and stop writing for newspapers stuck in archaic and conservative ideology.

In absolutely no way had the offending word (yes, I'll say it again - penis - because that is what it is!) been used vulgarly; in fact, I had only made reference to this male appendage to explain what happens when a man visits a clinic to get circumcised.

You would think that an upfront description of the procedure would be the best way to ensure that more Zimbabwean men, and their partners, better understand what the process entails.

But think again.

The newspaper that I had written the article for reasoned that the word was too "offensive" for their readership and that in the interests of dignity, they had to "tone things down." So was my biology teacher - and everyone who wrote my high school curriculum - a pervert for calling that male organ a penis, I found myself wondering...

I must hasten to add that this was not the first time this sort of thing had happened to me. In a country like Zimbabwe where censorship along the lines of partisan politics is the order of the day, body politics often stands as little chance of a fair hearing. Articles mentioning sexual violence, homosexuality and other societal taboos are more likely to be spiked or watered down to reflect this faux conservatism (how does Zimbabwe have one of the largest global HIV pandemics if people are not doing things like having sex then?) than to receive the light of day in the traditional press.

Blogging it out

I started blogging in 2009 after realising that a Zimbabwean media outlet that would not censor my views on important societal issues around sexuality and sexual rights would remain a pie in the sky for a long time to come. According to the 2010 Southern African Gender and Media Progress Study (GMPS), in Zimbabwe only 23% of female journalists and 14% of their male counterparts quote women in their articles and programmes. In short, our side of the story is little heard, or listened to.

My blog, Fungai Neni - meaning "Think with Me," in English - was born humbly, but definitely not quietly. My first feature

article was entitled "Erections don't mean affection" and since then I have had the opportunity to introduce the "p word," as well as many other "unsavoury" concepts.

Over the past two years I have posted 82 articles and received 870 comments and over 60 000 hits in the last two years; modest figures, I agree, but I believe that I have created a community; a safe space where women, and men, can freely discuss issues. Needless to say, one of my all-time most popular blog posts is one in which I question societal and personal perceptions of the vagina.

It has become obvious, at least to me, that speaking up demystifies and reforms popular notions. And I am glad that I have not been alone in this realisation.

Media silence as cowardice

In her witty blog posts, Zimbabwean blogger and journalist, Delta Milayo Ndou, invites us to join her in questioning why guaranteeing homosexual rights in Zimbabwe's new constitution is anathema to the majority of the population; why abused men aren't given a fair hearing and why the innocence of love perishes with age and experience. In so doing, she allows her private thoughts and opinions to enter the public domain for discussion and debate.

"I was frustrated by many things, but especially by the fact that the concerns of women were never prominently placed in the mainstream media or any public social discourse," explains Ndou as the reason why she started her blog, It's Delta, in 2009. "The media's silence is not a sign of virtue; it's a form of cowardice."

Article 30 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development calls for southern Africa's media to provide space for programmes by, and about, women on topical gender issues that challenge stereotypes. But this remains largely non-evident in Zimbabwe's media landscape where reportage continues to conform to a narrow and predictable news agenda.

In the absence of diversity, many young women are turning to blogging to discuss the issues that affect them. For example, former Miss Zimbabwe runner-up and architecture student, Nomakhosazana Ncube, tackles a range of issues including popular (mis)representations of beauty in Zimbabwe's society and the rarely broached subject of inter-tribal relationships, and the stereotypes of Ndebeles and Shonas in Zimbabwe. In one of her blog posts she writes:

"While it is alleged that most Ndebele girls are not virgins, it is also alleged that Shona men womanise more after they marry than before (these are just unfounded allegations). Don't get me wrong, they love their wives (I think), but give it a year and they are back in the dating business like they never left, this time masquerading as bachelors to unsuspecting Ndebele girls (did I mention that they are such good charmers...and spenders?). Married bachelors."

Another emerging blogger is Rumbidzai Dube, a lawyer and human rights advocate whose articles range in titles from "Sex is (not) easy in Africa," to "When men get raped," to "I am woman." As Dube describes, "I write to make a difference. When I blog I can be myself and say what I think without having to go through the arduous academic process of defining my methodology."

Critical voices

What emerges from this short investigation into Zimbabwe's women's blogosphere is that many of these voices belong to young, well-educated and opinionated women who are empowered - socially and technologically - to critically analyse their society, as well as their position within it. A question naturally follows from this observation; Does their discourse speak to the ordinary Zimbabwean woman, probably rural, and more than likely excluded from participation through lack of access to the Internet?

Perhaps it doesn't. And perhaps it's high time we began to realise that not all women's projects in Zimbabwe can cater to the needs of the least common denominator who is often depicted as being poor, powerless and persistently pregnant. As prominent Zimbabwean feminist, Everjoice Win, once asked, "Is resource poverty the only lens through which we should

look at [Zimbabwean] women's rights denial and violations."

Ndou, however, adds that blogging has created a platform through which women with access to ICTs can share the stories of those who do not. "If we were to wait until every woman had access to ICTs before recommending blogging as an empowerment tool, we'd be like idiots who do nothing because they feel that what they could do is too little," she says.

And idiots we definitely aren't!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fungai Machirori is a Zimbabwean journalist, researcher and blogger who completed her Masters in Development Studies in the United Kingdom. She was recently a runner-up in the World Summit Youth Awards for her blog, [\[http://www.worldpulse.com/user/6206/FungaiNeni/\]](http://www.worldpulse.com/user/6206/FungaiNeni/), for its impact in empowering young Zimbabwean women and hopes to return home to nurture and guide new bloggers.

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