

This project was a mock NSF proposal that I completed as part of my GLOA 605 Research Methods course. I completed this particular project because I have always been extremely interested in gender studies and women's rights, particularly in developing countries. I did the project over the course of the semester, combining what I learned about different research methods and how to follow the guidelines of an NSF proposal. During the course of the project, I also completed a CITI Ethics training certification course. This project was entirely new to me and an incredible undertaking. It was definitely the most challenging assignment I've completed in both my undergraduate and graduate studies. I am extremely proud of this proposal. It was a great accomplishment and prepared me for my future graduate studies.

**Isabella Zettler**

## **Closing the digital gender gap: Ugandan women and social media**

### Statement of the Research Problem

This project will be an analysis of the dynamic between Ugandan women and their use of social media platforms in relation to closing the societal gender gap that exists in their country. Although gender roles in Western African countries have been researched in the past, little has been focused on the future of these roles in the digital age. Recent studies have shown a drastic increase of women in African countries utilizing social media to network and promote humanitarian causes. This is unique as it allows women to engage in public roles outside of the home, that is, in the public forum which is social media while simultaneously maintaining the more traditional roles of childcare and homemaking. Through an ethnographic study of Kampala, Uganda, this project will examine the role of women on social media platforms, primarily focusing on Facebook and Twitter. I will analyze social media utilization, gender relationships and feelings towards gender roles within the context of daily social and political life of Uganda through the use of participant observation, interviews, semi-structured focus groups, and discourse analysis.

Free and transparent media is a pillar of democracy, yet it is still a grey area which is usually controlled by the government rather than private media companies. This makes Uganda an ideal region for this research project as it is a democracy which is still in its infancy. With the rise of social media platforms in the past decade, former authoritarian governments like Uganda have tried to control the narrative on these platforms by posting disinformation campaigns. Uganda is unique, however, as it is the only country where Facebook intervened in a presidential election. In January 2021, when presidential incumbent Museveni was creating fake accounts to garner support for his campaign while disparaging the opponent, Facebook removed all posts and fake accounts related to the elections. Due to the pandemic, most of the campaigning had been done online. This permitted women to freely exhibit their power to free speech and voice opinions about issues related to the election, a freedom that in the past was reserved for men. Additionally, there was a significant uptick in feminist movements on social media from other areas of Eastern Africa post-election.

In the scape of changing the current gender disparity, men are no longer able to control the traditional narratives and have begun to engage in online gender disinformation campaigns, which means spreading false information about women on Facebook and other global platforms. This is especially relevant in the current global climate as social media networking is proving to be a valuable tool for women and other marginalized groups to promote humanitarian causes or

promote cultural awareness. In a physically public sphere outside the home, they may be outnumbered whereas in the digital one the opportunities to meet other women is endless. As globalization is only increasing these technological global flows, the necessity to learn more about the role of social media in this complex process is highly relevant. Additionally, these flows tend to be gendered due to competitive global markets increasingly devaluing unskilled labor markets that women occupy such as domestic work and child raising. My proposal will analyze the ways that women are adapting in this changing socioeconomic climate and using social media as a catalyst to build communities with other women and challenge new gender roles.

Key concepts guiding my research proposal will be: 1) How are Ugandan women redefining perception of self in terms of gender roles on social media and how does this play out in the public sphere of their communities? 2) What role has social media played in facilitating the forming of community-building and networking online to promote humanitarian causes? 3) How do Ugandan women feel about gendered disinformation and their presence on social media?

### Review of the Literature

For decades, Uganda has experienced a tumultuous political change, one that has resulted in a widened gender gap between men and women (Wyrod 2016). Although Uganda is a democracy, it lacks many democratic processes (Tripp 2004). Government officials, primarily men, have often been involved in corrupt elections and electoral fraud (Bareebe and Abrahamsen 2021). These gaps occur in daily lives of women but in this new digital age, they are discovering how social media can be utilized to address some of these issues within their country (Arora 2019). In 2018, Uganda introduced a groundbreaking new tax would exemplify this already fragile relationship between women and the extent of their power to voice their opinion online, a luxury not available at home. It was called the social media tax and imposed a tax on all social media use (Steinert-Threlkeld and Boxell 2019). This mainly played out in the political arena, as women became shut out of most political affairs. However, they are finding ways to circumvent this issue and instead of a podium, they are using social media as their platform to reach their audience.

Women's rights are something that need to be properly defined. An area that this research project will explore is the problematic disparity between the Western world's idea of a women's right versus cultural norms within Uganda (Bond 2004; Wyrod 2016). Oftentimes, when women's rights are framed within a country, they focus entirely on empowering women instead of dismantling prior patriarchal norms and looking at the social processes which play into all of this (Wyrod 2008; Wyrod 2016). Much of this is a result of the Western world's imposing views of women's rights and supplying aid which is aimed solely at this one-dimensional approach to the subject (Erez and Dasandi 2019; Karan 2004).

Considering much of the aid funneled into humanitarian causes and women's rights is coming from U.S. based charities and NGO's, this creates a tension of how to frame these women's rights (Erez and Dasandi 2019). It will take the support of foreign support and monetary funds to propel the needed changes for Ugandan women to achieve their goals (Roach 2021). Some charities worry that because social media platforms are a public forum, it may have adverse effects on their image and therefore avoid using them as reliable sources of information

(Cartmell 2011; Erez and Dasandi 2019). This goes both ways, however, as it is often the only place where Ugandan women may voice their opinions and mission.

Another area that my research project will look at is the way that social media is playing a crucial role in reshaping the sphere in which Ugandan women live. For decades, they have existed in solely a private sphere (Webb and Buskens 2021). The men have worked and made money, while the women stayed home cooking and cleaning. As the literature indicates during extensive interviews, sometimes people don't even know if there exists a wife at home as she is rarely seen. Facebook and twitter are changing this dichotomy, as now the woman's presence exists in the public sphere which is the internet. Her visibility is increased, also leaving her vulnerable to the harassment from men who have previously held a monopoly over that sphere (Webb and Buskens 2021; Wyrod 2016).

As this sphere grows, so do the possibilities of what it can be used for. As social media usage across the country rises, so does digital activism. Twitter, for example, is primarily used in Uganda to promote a certain political campaign or party (Rukundo and Kakungulu-Mayambala 2019). Blogging has grown especially popular in Uganda. In 2018 a blog was used to promote the campaign of Miss Uganda. This is especially beneficial for women, who are not used to voicing their opinions in public. In Uganda, same-sexism is very common, with many women criticizing one- another for not obeying their roles as women. Their words oftentimes contradict with their actual beliefs, much of which can be attributed to deep-rooted gender inequalities (Webb and Buskens 2021; Wyrod 2016).

The third area that my research project will touch on is the role of the government and various political processes that play into controlling social media in Uganda. The Ugandan government is a democratic republic. Authoritarian regimes were abandoned in the 1990's in favor of a more democratic political process. However, as digital censorship has proven, much of this was simply a rebranding (Tripp 2004). Although individual thoughts and opinions are permitted under new legislation such as Uganda's Freedom of Expression, the government has found ways to circumvent the new laws in the wake of social media scrutinization (Bareebe and Abrahamsen 2021; Rukundo and Kakungulu-Mayambala 2019). The first law that the government enacted was in 2018, when they made the decision to place a tax on social media usage (Steinert-Threlkeld and Boxell 2019). They claimed that it was intended to raise domestic revenue, which proved to be fruitless. In October 2020, the government took further action by demanding that a person must obtain appropriate licensing before posting social media. This was a preemptive measure to ensure that Ugandan citizens were unable to vocalize their displeasure with the upcoming January 2021 elections (Bareebe and Abrahamsen 2021).

This is not to say, however, that some groups of men have not tried to discourage this closing of the digital gender gap. There are countless cases where women have been the victims of cyber harassment and online bullying by their male counterparts. In non-western countries, this online harassment is a tool used by men to intimidate women who are now occupying the same public sphere as them whereas they previously did not (Kasana 2014; Webb and Buskens 2021). Most often, it is attacks on bloggers but has also been a powerful tool in silencing female political campaigns on social media (Kasana 2014). However, despite these obstacles they face, women are learning to adapt to the new technological world growing around them.

Additionally, social media platforms, primarily Facebook, are constantly changing their rules for the content that they allow. During the January 2021 elections in Uganda, they recovered many fake accounts from Museveni, the current President, to shut down his opponent's campaign (Bareebe and Abrahamsen 2021). Nearly all the posts originated from

male-dominated electoral campaigns, shutting out women and female opponents altogether. To adapt to this, Ugandan women have begun to use social media in other ways. They realize that their power is in using it to spread their voices and individual messages. Some of the top female Ugandan bloggers are now writing down online their authentic experiences of their daily lives, from cooking with their family to the more intimate details (Arora 2019). In other words, whereas men are using social media to gain attention and votes, women are using it to empower other Ugandan women and give a firsthand experience to the rest of the world into their lives behind closed doors.

### Research Objectives

The proposed project outlines three major objectives in examining how Ugandan women are redefining gender roles through social media:

*Objective #1- Identifying women's presence in digital public spheres:* The first objective area that my research project will look at is the way that social media is playing a crucial role in reshaping the sphere in which Ugandan women live. For decades, they have existed in solely a private sphere (Webb and Buskens 2021). Sometimes, people don't even know if there exists a wife at home as she is rarely seen. There are no laws forbidding women from working, yet many of them choose to maintain traditional women's roles such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. Another big issue is that if the woman chooses to work, she is bound by relational autonomy (Milar 2014). She still feels an obligation to be at home with her children. In the digital age, social media is providing not only an outlet for communication but a possibility for income. Blogging, for example, is one of the largest ways that women in Uganda use social media. Through there, they can simply talk about their experiences or even teach cooking courses. Additionally, more women are taking classes in the IT fields or learning how to use technology in the workplace. This new digital job is a hybrid model of both being in the private sphere in the sense the women are physically at home and in the public sphere as they are sharing with the rest of the world. I hypothesize that as women increase their presence in this digital public sphere, women seek out social networks on social media that challenge current traditional gender roles. Alternatively, women may seek out a digital community of women that reaffirm traditional gender roles.

*Objective #2- Gendered disinformation campaigns on social media:* The second objective that my project will analyze is the presence of gendered disinformation campaigns to dissuade Ugandan women from using social media. Male counterparts who want to preserve traditional gender roles and delegitimize women's presence on social media engage in campaigning to bully and harass women. Literature has shown that this occurrence is more prevalent in traditional societies where patriarchal norms are being challenged by women on social media. I hypothesize that gendered disinformation campaigns are discouraging women from using social media platforms. Alternatively, women may not be affected by gendered disinformation campaigns.

*Objective #3- Community-building and networking to promote feminist movements:* The third objective that this research project will explore is Ugandan women and how they are

utilizing the networking aspect of social media to connect with other women and bring awareness to women's rights within their country. One example of this is Stella Nyanzi, a Ugandan blogger who has voiced her criticisms of the current government regime and the patriarchal policies that they have implemented. She has gained many followers, primarily consisting of other middle and lower-class Ugandan women who agree with her opinions. Despite Museveni's attempts to silence her by jail time, she has successfully drawn international attention to the current gender inequality in Uganda. I hypothesize that in the last year, since the 2021 Ugandan elections, there has been an increase in the number of Ugandan women's political advocacy groups on social media. Alternatively, I may find that there has been a decrease in the number of women's political advocacy groups on social media.

Key concepts guiding my research proposal will be: 1) How are Ugandan women redefining perception of self in terms of gender roles on social media and how does this play out in the public sphere of their communities? 2) What role has social media played in facilitating the forming of community-building and networking online to promote humanitarian causes? 3) How do Ugandan women feel about gendered disinformation and their presence on social media?

### Preliminary Studies

My research proposal is a product of my undergraduate coursework in women's studies, humanitarianism, graduate coursework in globalization and research methodologies, studying abroad in Spain and Northern Africa, as well as my grant-writing work in a women's refugee center in Toledo, Ohio. Before my pursuit of a graduate degree at George Mason University, I completed my undergraduate degree at The Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio with a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies and Spanish.

During my senior capstone at Bowling Green State University, I worked with a small group of students to write a grant and secure funding for US together, a non-profit refugee center located in Toledo, Ohio. Over the course of four months, we met with a small group of refugee women and children, majority of whom had fled dangerous circumstances in their home country. It was our job to gain insight and understanding from them, as we were working on setting up an early childhood education program. We realized the vast number of similarities that existed cross-culturally in relation to societal values towards women today. Furthermore, our grant was approved, and we secured \$10,000 in funding to start the program.

Prior to my pursuit of a graduate degree at George Mason University, much of my research interest was related to women in conflict zones. As part of my undergraduate program, I completed a research project analyzing the prevalence of women committing acts of terrorism when compared to men. My research challenged current global gender roles and attitudes towards women, as contemporary research has often portrayed females as passive and incapable of violence or acts of terrorism. A focal point of this research was case studies from Chechnya, where groups of female terrorists known as Black Widows perpetrated a series of suicide bombings in protest of the Russian-Chechen war.

During my time at BGSU, I not only received a solid foundation in cross-cultural studies and their applications but also a mentoring relationship with Dr. Beatrice Guenther, director of the International Studies Program. Dr. Guenther led our service-learning project and successfully changed the curriculum of the program from one which focused on solely in-person learning to

one that incorporated experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom as well. Following my graduation, Dr. Guenther also wrote a letter of recommendation for my graduate studies which was integral for my admission to the GLOA MA program. In summation, my previous experiences as well as relevant academic background and ties to the local community in Uganda will allow me to shape relevant research questions while conducting my study. Additionally, I am certified in CITI Ethics training, which will ensure that I conduct all my research in a way that conforms to ethical standards in regard to human subjects. This involves making the entire local community of Kampala aware of my intentions and research. I plan to conduct my ethnographic research in Kampala, Uganda and have taken the appropriate preliminary steps to establishing local contacts in that area. I have reached out to Miss Aijamal Duishebaeva at the Eastern African office of United Nations Women. She has assisted me in securing contacts as well as accommodation for the year-long duration of my project. I will be presenting my findings to her organization at the conclusion of my project. Additionally, I have also been contacted by Dr. Sarah Ssali, Dean of The School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University in Kampala. Given that my project can encourage ongoing discussion in this field, she has expressed interest in supporting my work and ongoing ethnographic research through the support of funding through The Makerere Innovation Research Fund.

## Research Design

### *Research Site:*

This project will take place in Kampala, the capital of Uganda and home to 1.68 million residents. Additionally, Kampala is both ethnographically and demographically diverse, representing both urban and rural populations. Ethnographic research in Kampala is valuable to this study as it gives an accurate representation of the country as whole in terms of attitudes towards gender roles as well as social media usage in the region. A reason for this is that social media usage depends heavily on a citizen's access to technology, whether it be in a public or private setting. Despite many women living in poor neighborhoods of Kampala and therefore lacking access to these resources, the city has many public libraries. Uganda also has implemented groundbreaking ICT initiatives through the creation of the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance in 2006. Since its creation, The Ministry has stated that its primary goal is to provide digital inclusion and access to technology across all populations in Uganda.

### *Research Methods:*

To document evidence of the relationship between women and social media, my project will require 12 months of research in Kampala, Uganda. To analyze this relationship, my methodology will mainly consist of ethnographic focus groups, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse/content analysis. Additionally, my research will incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

The first component of my research will involve an ethnographic focus group consisting of both men and women. The reason for this is that there are some major differences in how Ugandan women voice their opinion on social media in comparison to being in public or in their social circles that aren't online. Incorporation of this methodology will involve showing the women a recent commercial on local television that exploits traditional gender roles. From there, I will document how the women and men react to the video. I will look for patterns in behavior and language that the group uses when reacting to the video. My hypothesis is that the group will

reinforce the gender stereotypes and very few of them will challenge it when surrounded by the judgment of their peers.

The second component of my research will require extensive participant observation. I would form relationships with the women by perhaps attending a dinner at their home or another more public event such as a baptism. The reason for this is because over the course of my research, multiple sources have indicated that Ugandan women tend to be reserved yet are very welcoming and “open up” when they are in a private space such as their home or a community space such as a church. I have also learned that Ugandan women like to congregate with friends’ underneath trees in small social groups, so I will explore that area as well.

I will also need take some preliminary steps, however, to be respectful to them, their personal privacy, and cultural values. This will involve contacting a local official or leader in their community and making them aware of my presence and the goal of my research. This will also involve speaking to their husbands and making the entire family fully aware of the research I was conducting. If not, my participants could potentially become suspicious of me and not grant me permission into their inner circle.

The third component of my research will be an interview I have conducted with Lisa Reppell, global social media and disinformation specialist at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Contextual information obtained from this interview will help me to assess my second objective. Reppell is an expert in disinformation campaigns domestically and their international implications. Her interview provides extensive support for the regulation of social media and how disinformation campaigns undermine democratic systems as they are a form of hate speech. Additionally, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with local experts in Uganda as well as female activists and bloggers.

In assessing my first objective related to women’s presence in digital public spheres, I will conduct a focus group of local men and women in Kampala. The reason for a focus group is that the goal is to recreate the same dynamic that one would see in the community. As views may differ greatly between generations, there will also be diversity in the ages of my participants. I will show the focus group a commercial which exploits traditional gender roles and gauge their reactions. Following this, I will conduct a discourse analysis in which I look for themes in the attitudes toward traditional women’s roles. I will do this by coding a series of 40 Twitter posts by Ugandan women. My third methodological component will consist of extensive participant observation with women in the community to compliment my previous methodologies and contribute additional qualitative data.

To analyze the affect that gendered disinformation campaigns have on women’s usage of social media, I will use a mixed methodology of semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and participant observation. I will conduct a series of semi-structured interview with experts in the area of disinformation campaigns as well as Kampalan women. My content analysis will consist of looking at social media reactions to female politicians and activists. As gendered disinformation campaigns are not limited to the opposite sex, I will be conducting my analysis on Facebook posts from both men and women. The purpose of this is to look for the repetition and frequency of language related to cyber bullying and harassment. Similar to my previous objective, I will continue my participant observation by becoming an active participant within the local community, attending both public events such as church services as well as more private ones such as dinner at another community members house.

Analyzing my final objective of community-building and networking by Ugandan women to promote feminist movements will require extensive quantitative data gathering to

assess the social media activity surrounding the joining of women's rights groups. I will employ the use of a survey of Ugandan women to assess the prevalence of women joining these groups in the past year since the election. I will also be using this survey to determine the day-to-day participation of women in these groups and whether they are actively promoting these causes via social media. Additionally, I plan to use participant observation to observe women's participation in feminist movements "on the ground" and in public areas of the community and how they interact. I will do this by attending a women's rights protest in a nearby community. My final methodology will be a content analysis of search histories on Facebook and Twitter. To maintain privacy standards, this analysis will be conducted from public searches made available at the Kampala public library. The content I will look for is the repetition of language in the past year of search history which actively shows women seeking out women's rights groups.

Furthermore, downtown Kampala has been the site for many female-led political and activism, many of which have ended in violence.

#### *Data management and analysis:*

In this project, I will employ ethnographic approaches to data collection, management, and analysis. I will enter field notes resulting from participant observation daily into a laptop computer. I will do digital voice recordings of interviews or take detailed notes during each interview. A small media organization in Kampala will help me to create a digital archive of interviews and social media posts related to my project. I will generate a list of categories for analysis based on my previously outlined objectives and create an index that references interviews and discourse materials based on those categories.

I will take every measure during my data gathering and analysis to inform those interviewed of their rights as research participants and to maintain the confidentiality of all information revealed to me. Specifically, I will: (1) keep participation entirely voluntary; (2) obtain consent from all those interviewed; (3) inform those interviewed that they can interrupt their participation at any time; (4) request permission before using any recording device; and (5) maintain all identifying information in a secure place separate from other data, with access given only to me and my academic advisors at George Mason University.

Upon returning to George Mason University in December 2022, I will make full use of university materials and resources in order to complete the process of data analysis. I will apply for competitive grants through George Mason University. As a graduate student at George Mason University, I will also have access to funding for conference travel so that I can report on the preliminary results of this study at the meetings of the professional organizations in Gender, Media, and Development studies.

#### *Dissemination of findings:*

During the course of my research, I will share my findings in a variety of ways. First, I will be an active participant in HeForShe, a social media campaign hosted by UNWomen to create a digital alliance of men and women committing to gender equality. I will use this online platform, which has an activist community of over 3 million, to discuss my research and contribute to their existing research on the subject. My institutional affiliation with Makerere University will provide opportunities for me to discuss my work in an academic setting. I will give copies of my completed research project to the women and residents of Kampala, as well as

Month	Date/Duration	Task
1	January 2022 (1 month)	-Establish contact with residents of Kampala -Contact local officials and inform them of my research study -Conduct participation observation on one year anniversary of 2021 social media blackout during elections
2,3	February/March 2022 (2 months)	-Organize first focus group by meeting with local women and generating interest in project -Second literature review at School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University and UNWomen Africa
4	April 2022 (1 month)	-Conduct focus group and continue participant observation -Begin compiling social media and relevant search texts at the National Library of Kampala
5,6	May/June 2022 (2 months)	-Preliminary analysis of focus group -Consult with local experts in digital feminist movements, local female bloggers and digital activists
7	July 2022 (1 month)	-Mid-point assessment of research progress -Conduct preliminary discourse and content analysis of social media source compilation
8	August 2022 (1 month)	-Conduct semi-structured interview with local expert -Continue participant observation, compiling social media texts, etc.
9	September 2022 (1 month)	- Continue participant observation, discourse/content analysis of text -Conduct survey of social network usage
10	October 2022 (1 month)	- Preliminary analysis of survey - Preliminary analysis of semi-structured interview
11	November 2022 (1 month)	-Preliminary analysis of ethnographic material -Secondary literature review at School of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University and UNWomen Africa
12	December 2022 (1 month)	-Preliminary analysis of ethnographic material -Presentation of findings in School of Women and Gender studies at Makerere University and UNWomen Africa

local officials and scholars at Makerere University. I will present my research at professional conferences and other academic venues and submit articles to Women's rights and Media studies journals. After receiving my graduate degree, I plan to seek opportunities at an international non-profit institution where I can conduct research around global women's rights and advocate for women's groups and political involvement in developing countries.

Research Schedule:

Significance:

The intellectual merit of this project lies in its ethnographic attention to the relation between social platform use and the reshaping of gender roles. This product enriches

anthropological studies of women in developing countries by analyzing the existing socioeconomic and political structures which influence gender roles and how women are rebuilding them in digital public forums. Additionally, my project contributes to research on digital political activism and the inclusion of women in global mediascapes (Blackden, Ellis, and Manuel 2005). Ethnographic analysis of the local transmission of social media networking among Kampalan women and the subsequent regional effects offers an opportunity to examine the global possibilities of information and communication technologies in relation to gender parity.

The broader impacts of my project include the reexamination of social media regulation and laws by transnational governments. This includes increasing access to social media and ICT's in developing countries and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa which is undermining economic development (Shiferaw et al 2015, 475-488). My research may have a strong sociocultural impact as Uganda serves as a representation of many regions struggling with gender disparity and patriarchal governing bodies which exclude women from decision-making processes. My work may lead to more governments addressing these concerns in collaboration with one another. Finally, my work will provide an ethnographic analysis of women's participation in political change through digital activism and community building. Unlike past literature in this area which focuses on a Eurocentric concept of women's rights (Wyrod 2016), my research aims to be completely unbiased. That is, some women may be in favor of maintaining traditional gender roles for men and women. Rather, my research aims to gauge the level of participation by women in being active in political or cultural change through social media.

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