

# Hey women can play dirty too! Social media, Building and Construction: A tale of empowerment in the developing world

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## Extended Abstract

This paper explores the role of social media in women's empowerment. In particular, the paper explores the role of social media and the influence it is having in enabling women to participate in building and construction. The paper focusses on Zambia where rapid urbanisation is taking place and where women are playing a significant part in the changing landscape of building and construction. Rapid urbanisation has been made possible by the availability of land which previously lay untapped, docile and undeveloped and now its availability has led to the development and construction of new structures. Suddenly, it is as if a sleeping Lion has been awoken as at every turn in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia and beyond, new structures are springing up. As lay people begin to see the importance of owning land, there seems to be a scramble to purchase a piece of land to construct one's own home. Where owning land and constructing a home was mainly the preserve of men, women are also now getting involved in the arena. One way women are getting involved in building and construction is through their use of social media which is used as a vehicle for the women to become building and construction developers in their own right. It is Zambian women's ability to bypass traditional hierarchical gender structures by using digital social media that has enabled them to take part in this new phenomenon. This extended abstract aims to give a glimpse of this. Using Sen's Capability approach, the paper endeavors to explore how social media is enhancing women's place in a field that has been male dominated and how through this, is providing them with capabilities to be able to do things they value and therefore elevate their well-being in society. It aims to do this by exploring the role of social media in its contribution to women's empowerment through building and construction. Social media [1] offers opportunities which include collaboration, content communities which allow the sharing of media content between users and the opportunity to create personal profiles, invite friends and colleagues and thereby allow the exchange of varied kinds of information. Using the capability approach as its evaluation tool, the paper also aims to explore the capabilities that have resulted for women thereof. The paper uses Sen's ideas of a capability approach which is concerned with an individual's ability to achieve development and freedom through valuable functionings and therefore wellbeing [2]. In addition, Sen views one's capabilities as a form of freedom to be able to do the things that a person has reason to value [3]. Therefore, the capability approach allows this paper to explore and understand the women's networking and informational capabilities [4] as they use social media. The capability approach has grown in its use in different disciplines including ICT4D research [5, 6]. For this research, it is most valuable as it can be used to evaluate inequalities and well-being [7, 8] and therefore showcase the capabilities that women have developed as a result of their use of social media to empower themselves. An online questionnaire using google forms was distributed to research participants through the authors own contacts as well as through colleagues and friends. Some of the question-

naires were directly administered to a known Zambian online platform used by women interested in building and construction known as *Bana Mayo: Building/Construction through Motivation and Inspiration*. Bana Mayo is a term of respect for Women. The questionnaire was intended to understand how social media has changed user's lives. It was also intended to capture the essence of gender and what role social media has played in trying to bring equity between women and men. In addition, the questionnaire's aim was to understand resulting user's social and economic development if any as a result of using social media. Lastly, the questionnaire was also intended to understand the challenges that may result from the use of social media.

Findings thus far suggest that most women chose social media platforms related to real estate business and land acquisition. The platforms were not chosen on the basis of gender but on how informative they were to the needs of women. For example, it was important for the women to choose and belong to platforms that were helpful with respect to the sort of information they were after which specifically related to building and construction. For example, women were keen to know about properties or land being sold and at what cost. They were also on the look-out for bargains and how they would be able to connect with good bricklayers and plumbers for constructions they were undertaking as well as where they would source building materials. Top on the agenda was also the desire to learn about good and fashionable designs for their constructions either in order to attract a good clientele for their rental properties or in order to improve the homes they had built for themselves and therefore elevate their living standards. The women also wanted to expand their knowledge about rules and laws around land acquisition particularly with respect to traditional and commercial land. This suggests that social media presents new ways of being for women in developing countries like Zambia and therefore offers women a tool to exercise self-reliance, engage in new ways of empowering themselves and therefore better their lives. In this case, social media presents new ways of allowing women to have a voice and find new ways of overcoming or at least trying to overcome the obstacles that often beset them. So although women in a country like Zambia may still function within a male dominated system, social media is allowing them new ways of being. One would argue that social media is allowing the women involved in building and construction to disrupt as well as deconstruct the very systems that subordinate them. For example, not too long ago, construction, land acquisition as well as real estate development was mainly the preserve of the male elite but because of women challenging the existing 'order of things' and the patriarchal structures through social media use, things are changing. Social media is impacting on the way in which urbanisation is creating new structures, but also in the capabilities and functionings [3] it is providing women and allowing them to be able to 'be' and 'do' the things they want and value. These include the creation of new identities and empowerment for themselves, and the offer of online digital spaces to be able to explore their lifeworld's in new ways. The availability and use of social media by the women of Zambia interested in building and construction has meant that women have been able to develop their capabilities to use social media to their advantage by sharing and exchanging information and new ideas as well having the freedom to explore new business ventures in the field of building and construction. The women have been emboldened to use social media as a vehicle to organise themselves and become developers in their own right to build and construct homes. The result is that they are having economic independence that comes through home-ownership or by building structures that they can rent out or sale and derive an income from, therefore, earning themselves capital to better their lives and those of their families.

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