

Gender Representations and Identity Constructions Among Youth in Botswana

Exploring the Influence of Media

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Departing from a non-media centric and non-gender-centric perspective this chapter explores the role of media in the cultivation of gender identities among contemporary youth in Botswana. Drawing on data from a recent multi-methodological fieldwork I concentrate on essays written by village teenagers on the topic “My life 20 years from now”. The aim is to discuss the extent to which the representational resources used by the teenagers – within this genre of identity construction and in light of the wider fieldwork – can be traced to media or other sources. I find that Botswana teenagers make use of a diverse mix of gender-fluid, counter-stereotype and gender traditional representations and engage with identity constructions far beyond gender stereotypes. Many of these constructions can be directly linked to gender representations available in schools, families, and the local communities, yet less to media. This is partly due to low media access, and partly that media representations impact indirectly through other significant actors in their environments using media-inspired representations.

Botswana is an interesting place when it comes to gender, social change and the role of media. This former British protectorate has since independence in 1966 transformed itself from a predominantly patriarchal society and one of the poorest countries in the world, to a middle income country with the highest human development index score in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the most gender equal, democratic and media-developed countries on the continent (ITU, 2016; SADC, 2015). A move beyond traditional gender representations has definitely taken place in several arenas, yet it has many faces and patriarchal logics do persist on the level of everyday life in many spaces. The role of media to the various motions and present realities is ambiguous and one of complex interrelations. In this article, drawing on data from a recent fieldwork in Botswana and concentrating on examples from essays written by village teenagers on the topic “My life 20 years from now”, I depict images that are common to boys

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and girls in this setting and suggest to the influence of gender representations in media to these. Below, after a brief sketch of some of the changes in gender and media that has taken place in the Botswana context, these essays are presented as a case to depict how contemporary young Batswana use gender representations to construct their identities and to discuss the extent to which these gender representations may be linked to media sources.

The changing landscape of gender representations and media in Botswana

By statistical measures, one of the clearest changes to the landscape of gender representation in Botswana has happened within education and the labour market. Whereas the enrolment rate in primary education around independence was less than 20 percent and primarily boys, it is today 98 percent and gender parity is achieved to the extent that females now outperform males in all levels of schooling and outnumber them in tertiary education (SADC, 2015). Another change has taken place within employment and economic independence. In the 60's most people lived in rural areas, survived on subsistence farming (women's work) and cattle herding (men's work). Today 75 per cent of women and 83 per cent of men are formally employed and many of them live in cities and towns (Statistics Botswana, 2016). The work force in Botswana has been, and still is, highly mobile. This affects family life and organisation. Around half of the households in Botswana today are female headed (single) and many children stay with relatives in the villages for primary schooling while their parents pursue work or education elsewhere. Yet, traditional gender roles and expectations from the Tswana culture – “where women were rural minors, subject to the representation of their senior male kin” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 270) – are still part of the collective memory, enacted in customary law (Griffiths, 1997) and takes various expressions on the level of everyday life. For instance, although women are represented in decision-making positions (in politics, government administrations, media and businesses), men still dominate the public (SADC, 2015) and women still take on more responsibility in care for children and the sick (many are affected by HIV/AIDS). Gender-based harassment and violence are rising problems (Gender Affairs Department, 2014), and it has been claimed that gender representations in village settings are more traditional and less diverse than in the capital (Giddings & Hovorka, 2010).

Whereas state initiated agendas and investments in education, poverty eradication and infrastructure – supported by the constitution,¹ stable governance, international agencies (UN, World Bank etc.) and increased income after the finding of large mineral deposits in the late 60's – beyond doubt have been decisive factors to the changes and diversifications of gender representations that has taken place in Botswana, the role played by media to these developments is less obvious.

Media have, since independence, been used as a tool to “inform and educate the Nation” (Vision 2016) and has as such also contributed to the dissemination of the more diverse gender representations in this agenda. The wider reach and diversity of media are nevertheless quite a recent situation. Until the mid-1980’s Botswana media consisted primarily of a state owned radio station and newspaper. Public TV broadcast started up in 2000. The media market has been liberated since and today both state and privately owned national newspapers, radio stations, TV channels and mobile operators provide a wide variety of media services side-by side, also online. However, and despite a steady increase in public access, this wide array of media tools and services are still not available to all (Statistics Botswana, 2016). Botswana remains one of the world’s most unequal countries with high levels of poverty and unemployment – especially among the young the many female headed households and those who live in villages (World Bank, 2015). Although most people today may have access to simple cell-phones and a majority also to radio and TV, use of media (hence also direct influence by media) is limited for many due to high costs and infrastructural problems. High media use – especially of internet – is still primarily an opportunity for the minority of the population (less than 30 per cent) with higher education and/or income, and where we find more men than women (Storm-Mathisen, forthcoming; see also Deen-Swarray, Gilwald & Morell, 2012; Statistics Botswana, 2015). For young people the common trajectory is that they gain access to their first simple mobile phone, to the internet and a broader media landscape as they move away from home to follow up on secondary and/or tertiary education or work.

Recent studies suggest that gender stereotype representations (e.g., sexual domination and control by men over women) perpetuate in the liberated Botswana media market (SADC, 2015), although ideals for practices of subversive behaviours and re-articulations (Rapoo, 2013) – for instance in educational radio and TV-programs (Odirile, 2016) – are also present. There is however scarce knowledge of how prevailing gender representations in the present media landscape are used, understood and influence constructions of gender identities in Botswana. Given the broader changes to the gender representations and the uneven patterns of media consumption, variations and complex interrelations between them are likely. Therefore, to understand the potential impact of gender representations in media to the cultivation of gender identities requires not only looking at media and media consumption, but also looking into the settings where gendered identifications happen and where representational resources from media are interpreted and used together with representations from other sources.

“My life 20 years from now”

– essays written by young teenage Batswana

My claims in this chapter are based on data from a 6-months long fieldwork (October 2015 to April 2016) in Botswana, undertaken as part of a project that investigated the

links between development and the new media revolution in various African contexts.² Fieldwork was conducted in two sites: the capital of Gaborone (pop. 200,000) and a rural village (pop. 9,000) situated at the edge of the Kalahari desert where we lived and took part of everyday life. Data was gathered through a wide fan of methods in both settings; participant observation, interviews, digital ethnography, surveys, a collection of photo-video diaries and written essays in addition to study of available secondary sources. The approach was at the outset non-media centric (Morley, 2009) seeking to grasp the concerns of people and how media (as things, medium and content) were used to these ends. To move beyond the sex/gender binary (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015) and avoid making pre-judgmental claims, the approach was also non-gender-centric (Storm-Mathisen, 2015) with an investigation aimed to understand in what ways and to what ends gender representations were used – and by whom.

The discussion below draws on insights from the whole fieldwork, including interviews (with parents, children and teachers), home and school observations and the survey we conducted from door to door in the village (Storm-Mathisen, forthcoming), but will concentrate on providing examples from the essays written by teenage pupils who lived in the village. In all 96 essays – on the topic “My life 20 years from now: what I do, where I live and what I did to get there” – were collected from pupils age 11-16 on the highest levels at the primary school and secondary school in this setting. The collection of the essays was organized, in collaboration with the school, as a competition. Participation was voluntary, but pupils could use school-time to write and the best essay on each school won a tablet. Space prohibits me from providing detail or substantiate the representativity of this material further, except to say that the essays serve: (i) as an exemplary case of the diversity in gender representations and media exposure that we could observe within and across other settings in our fieldwork and (ii) as a case of how available gender representations, be they from media or other sources, become significant as they are used to construct and perform identities (Butler, 1990).

Gender representations in young teenage identity constructions

In considering the gender representations at play in the 96 essays written by the village teenagers on “My life 20 years from now: what I do, where I live and what I did to get there” three features were particularly striking:

Firstly, there were no clear differences in how self-identified boys and girls in these village schools envisioned their future education and occupation. All hoped to complete education beyond secondary school and be independent in terms of income (e.g., “if you are educated life is good”). Both boys and girls saw themselves in occupations such as doctor, business owner, nurse, engineer, teacher, police officer, community worker and soldier (the only gender specific choices of occupation were voiced by two girls who wanted to become respectively an internationally signed singer “like Rhianna” (F11)

and Miss World (F1). Dreams regarding consumption (being the owners of cars and houses) or to have children and be responsible for own family, parents, community and nation were also similar for girls and boys. That no self-identified female envisioned themselves to be only “mother”, “housewife” or “farmer” points to a clear move away from the traditional representation of women being financially dependent on men. This, combined with the pattern that most pupils represented their future education and occupation in gender neutral terms and that 37 per cent of the pupils did not use any gender representations in their writing,³ suggests that gender identity is of little significance to what these Botswana pupils claim they are able to accomplish.⁴

Secondly, the few pupils who did make use of traditional gender representations (i.e., women: do farming, men: own cattle) mentioned it either as something that characterized activities of their parents’ generation or as activities they themselves would engage with *after* they had obtained education and (modern) occupation – a sequential model (Mojula, 2014) much advocated by schools and government. For instance, a boy who wanted to become a social worker to help disadvantaged people and community leaders adds: “Our customs state that at 36 years a young man should get married because family is very important. It is also a norm for every Mokgalagadi man to have cattle so I would like to have my own cattle post as it would give me the deserved dignity in our community. I will have a herd boy at the cattle post thus creating a form of employment” (M15). Similarly a girl who wrote she would first become a nurse, then buy herself a car and a house added: “As a woman I will also have lands, I will be a farmer and grow crops and rear livestock as well. I will look after my things and God will help me so that life goes on. I will look after my children and advise them to learn at school because education is key to success. I will sometimes go to the lands when I have offs or on leave, to look after my crops when it is time for growing. I will cooperate in society because I am a woman” (F82). This suggests traditional gendered representations are valued, yet transformed in the future vision of these teenagers through the idea that education leads to an economic independence that will enable them to hire labour and allow for some later engagement with traditional activities as well.

Finally, there were some girls who attended to concerns with relations to future husbands drawing on negative representations of uneducated men today. One girl for instance, who wanted to become a teacher writes: “I will be married to a man that is educated, because if I marry a man that is not educated he will want me to buy food and take my money” (F75). Another girl who wanted to become a doctor writes “I do not marry in Botswana but in America because in Botswana people kill their wife. In America people do not kill their wife” (F78). Our wider fieldwork (Helle-Valle, 2016), as well as other studies (McIlwaine & Datta, 2004), indicate that counter-traditional gender representations and identities have been embraced more wholeheartedly by females than males, which can lead to complex negotiations of gender relations further on in adulthood.

The influence of media to evolving gender identities

So what may be the role of prevailing gender representations in media to the gender representations used and the gender identities expressed by the young in these essays?

At first glance influence from prevailing gender representations in media appear to be of little importance to the rather varied gender identity constructions expressed by the teenage pupils (that is, their use of overwhelmingly gender-neutral representations with respect to education and occupation, the occasional adding of traditional gender representations to that of independence and the female concern with potential challenges with respect to future relations to Batswana men). Direct reference was rather made to influence from non-media sources in their everyday environment. They referred to the school curriculum and the national Vision 2016 (the latter some even sited: “an educated, informed, prosperous, productive and innovative nation” (?06)). They also referred to role models in their environment: their teachers (e.g., “my teacher she has helped me shape my life”), parents and particularly mothers (i.e., “I am a girl born in a remote area, but moved here (to the village) since my mother got a job as a police officer” or “My role model is my mother, because she is the one who encourages me to learn so hard at school” (?24), kin (referring to advice from uncles, older siblings), community and church (they often cite words from the bible). This pattern – common for girls, boys as well as those whose gender could not be identified – is not so strange given the rather gender equal labour market, the many female headed households and the strong gender equality rhetoric’s and ideals in the formal institutions these pupils are parts of in their everyday life (i.e., the school curriculum and various programmes and initiatives of local government and NGO’s). A high majority of the village pupils do not have direct contact with media on a regular basis. Only half of the village pupils live in households where there was a radio or a TV available (and the commonly watched programs were prophetic church broadcasting and public news), only a handful of them have access to personal media (1 per cent under 15 years has a mobile phone, 17 per cent have a household computer). None of the schools had working TV’s or computers (but computers and internet were available at the village library and for pay at an internet café).

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that media have no influence on the identity constructions of these young. Firstly, there were representations in use that could be directly traced to sources in mass media or new media. In two of the 96 essays the gender specific dreams of future occupations had media as source (the girl who wanted to become a singer like Rhianna and the girl who wanted to become a beauty pageant like Miss World) and were construction made by pupils who were among the very few who had access to their own mobile phone (and occasionally surfed the internet). Several pupils also cite or use gender-neutral wordings that can be traced back to media, and particularly TV (i.e., sayings from a prophetic minister in South Africa, reference to educational TV or citing of international heroes). Secondly, and more dominantly, many pupils express dreams and ideas of future that may have come their way partially

through media, but perhaps more indirectly. For instance gender neutral dreams of consumption – like getting a big houses, eating modern food and driving fancy cars, gaining better access to media technologies (i.e., to have their own TV or mobile phone, to be able to surf on the internet, to become knowledgeable enough to develop internet services as business etc.) – or the representation used by some girls that husbands in America are different from those in Botswana. Although these representations are similar to content we know are available through media, the source of the representations used by the pupils could not easily be directly linked to specific media content. It was rather through the performances and word-by mouth of other villagers – who had better access and more direct media-use than these pupils (schoolteachers, friends and older peers, family members etc.) – that elements from media gained influence and became woven into the local discourses (i.e., of what signified success and failure or what men and women could do or not do).

Similar to what has been said about the essays, other parts of the fieldwork in Botswana also suggest to a great deal of variance and tensions in present gender representations and identity construction and the direct role of media is often difficult to extract. As many people in Botswana still not are very active with media, much cultivation of gender representations is inspired by the everyday settings. As such it appears still to be the mothers and fathers, teachers and headmasters, peers, nurses, chiefs and others around, who – through their individual accomplishments – represent and inspire possible routes for the young to move beyond traditional gender stereotypes. However, as the identity constructions of these role models in turn draw on gender representations available to them – which may to a larger extent include those in the media – it contributes to the connecting and weaving together of representations from schools, families, local environments, ‘old’ and ‘new’ media in new constellations. Through the continuous repetitions of such complex entanglements in identifications in the everyday gender representations in media take part in the cultivating of the new identity constructions.

Gender, change, media

There are limits to what essays written by pupils can tell us about the unfolding changes in the gender landscape in Botswana and the relative impact of gender representations in media to these processes. The writing of an essay in a competition at school about the future constitutes a specific genre quite different to many other practices of contemporary everyday life (i.e., it is less dialogical and more engaging with ‘old’ media technology to a formal audience in comparison to being with friends or family watching TV or posting on Facebook). Nevertheless, the essays do provide valuable insight into the gendered aspects of identity constructions among contemporary young Batswana and the relative role of media to these identity constructions of young Batswana today. Firstly, the essays show that both gender-fluid and counter stereotype as well as gender traditional

representations are put to use by young Batswana in their constructions of their future selves. Moreover, the young combine these to envision trajectories different from those of their parents' generation and in ways that suggest a clear move beyond stereotypes. Secondly, gender representations in media cannot easily be isolated as a singular factor that influences directly. Although media clearly have been important for the spreading of more varied gender representations to broader audiences and in providing platforms for expressions and negotiations of these in Botswana, large variations in media access produce a diverse landscape of influence with many indirect relations. The educational system – a setting decisive for the production of modern subjects (Mojula, 2014) and where there is gender equality in enrolment and intensions (although the latter it is not always reflected in practice, see Dunne 2007, Mosime, Ntshwarang & Mookodi, 2012) – families and the local environments remain to be influential production sites for gender identities. Thirdly, as these identity constructions discussed took place in the village – a setting where media use is rather low and stereotypical gender representations are claimed to persist – the essays provide a telling example of the variations in the representational landscape, the complex ways through which media influence as actors combine and cultivate gender representations from a mix of sources and the varied and moving gender identity constructions that we find among Batswana today. In all, I hope to have shown some aspects of the richness, variety and unpredictability of gender and media in its intersectional reality and factor in Africa's changing face.

Notes

1. The Botswana constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex or gender (SADC, 2015).
2. See: www.mediafrica.no
3. There is no gender distinguishing pronouns in Setswana, and first names are often used interchangeably.
4. A majority of the pupils who did state something about gender were female. Although this could suggest gender is more of concern to girls than boys, this is hard to verify and argue for as it is also possible that there was equal male and female representation among those who did not gender identify and a higher proportion of males among those who did not write an essay.

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