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## WOMEN-NGOS AND FINANCIAL VIABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROCESSES FROM A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the challenges associated with women-NGOs' financial inadequacy as agents of women empowerment processes in Zimbabwe. With the utility of a resource-dependency theory and a qualitative paradigm, the study discovered that some women-NGOs were downsizing and/or closing due to financial paucity; most of them were skeletal in nature, compromising on coverage. The study also problematizes the donor-dependency syndrome of women-NGOs in Zimbabwe leading to a discourse on the sustainability of these NGOs. The discussion through social work lenses recommended immense advocacy for gender-sensitive policies which can facilitate gender mainstreaming efforts being made by the civil society in light of the current political-economic challenges. A plea for good governance, accountability and a paradigm shift towards developmental interventions aligned to a more integrated approach to solving socio-economic ills is also made in line with the tenets of developmental and critical social work.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Financial paucity; Donor-dependency; Women empowerment; Social work; Zimbabwe*

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Funding and budgeting issues in the NGO sector are critical factors which women NGOs have to contend with if ever they would realize their goals (Kativhu, Mazvimavi, Tevera, and Nhapi, 2018; Chirinda, 2016; Chikumba, 2014). This is largely related to the issues of impact, coverage as well as the sustainability of their women empowerment programs. Many NGOs, especially in resource-constrained countries of Africa complement their governmental efforts in the provision of various public services that governments may fail to provide (Mafa, 2017). The prevalence of some of the gender-gaps is evidenced by the commonness of feminization of poverty, of HIV/AIDS and of unemployment; not just in Zimbabwe, but on a global scale (Kang'ethe and Munzara, 2014; WHO, 2013; Chant, 2006; Malaba, 2006).

Importantly, the activities of these women-NGOs are aimed at long-term visions such as the eradication of poverty, the reduction of HIV and AIDS and the improvement of the general welfare of women (Human Development Report, 2015; Zungura, 2012; Lewis and Opaku-Mensah, 2006). Such goals may be extracted from global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the specific countries' national agendas. In Zimbabwe, the mandate of many women-NGOs is currently driven by the SDGs and the National Gender Policy of 2013-2017 (Van eedewijk and Mugadza, 2015). These are targets communicated through visions and mission statements to direct NGOs' efforts and providing indicators to monitor progress.

However, the translation of such visions and mission statements is sorely dependent on the availability of resources. Financial sustainability according to Layton (2006) mainly determines the closure or the functioning of any NGO. In regard to this, Arhin, Kumi and Adams (2018) and Berta and Burger (2015) reveal that the majority of these NGOs look to their external environment and stakeholders for financial viability. In concurrence, Lekorwe and Mpabanga (2007) and Smith and Bornstein (2001) lament that NGOs are generally failing to financially self-sustain as they heavily depend on external donors for their sustainability. This shows that many NGOs depend on donor-funding for their gender-programming and delivery. The resource-dependency theory is therefore used to explain the performance and behavior of these NGOs as they pursue their mandate for the empowerment of women in Zimbabwe amidst the politics of donor-funding (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003).

From a social work's perspective, resources are critical where there is need to challenge forms of social injustices that the vulnerable population face (Zastraw, 2010). According to Twikirize, Asingwire, Omona, Lubanga and Kafuko (2013:155), "The role that social work can play in accelerating gender equality and women empowerment is embedded in the very definition of the social work profession, that is, not only as a problem-solving profession, but as a change agent that aims to empower individuals and groups and promote harmonious relationships." Women-NGOs as social welfare agents are therefore significant employment agencies for social workers to advocate for the empowerment of women and the girl child in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, the function of the agency and the availability of resources are essential to foster gender-responsive programs which are necessary for the attainment of gender parity. This entails that an agency should secure the required resources in order to provide the services for the clientele. This has therefore justified an exploration of women NGOs' financial capacity in order to appraise their ability to ensure that their mandate is translated into programs and services that can ensure the empowerment of women in Zimbabwe. Through the resource-dependency theory, this paper sought to discuss some of the concomitant implications that are associated with the scarcity of financial resources in an attempt to suggest recommendations that would keep women-NGOs afloat amidst of the current economic and political instabilities in Zimbabwe.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RESOURCE DEPENDENCY THEORY

This article adopted the resource-dependence theory propounded by Pfeffer and Salancik to analyse the dynamics associated with the financial challenges of women-NGOs in Zimbabwe. The theory gives critical lenses to highlight the importance of resources in gender mainstreaming and the attainment of women empowerment (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003). The relevance of the theory also lies in its ability to discuss the unassailable link between the aptitude of women NGOs to secure and acquire financial resources and the feasibility of realising their mandate as stated in their mission and vision statements. This theory argues that there are many factors that can influence the attainment of women empowerment other than just the willingness of NGOs to spearhead women empowerment issues (Mafa, 2017). The ability of the management to harness inputs necessary for the running of organizations, for example administrative and operational costs has a bearing on the sustenance and operation of NGOs. A direct influence of the financial and economic environment on the operations of NGOs is therefore underscored. The resource dependency theory also reveals the power dynamics that are prevalent between the funding organizations and the NGOs who are recipients of such funds (Kumi, 2017). This entails that external funders may exert controlling powers on women-NGOs, thereby enabling the diversion of the mandate to suit those of the funders. Ultimately, the civil society may incline their loyalties more to the funders instead of the clientele they seek to serve. Such unequal power dynamics may be influenced by political and/or economic factors prevailing in Zimbabwe. Since most of the NGOs in Zimbabwe are donor-driven, any positive or negative

changes in funding have direct implications on the sustainability of women-NGOs and their ability to deliver on their mandate.

## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

### **Aim of the study**

The article is extracted from a study which sought to appraise women-NGOs as agents of women empowerment processes in Zimbabwe. The financial inadequacy of women-NGOs was raised as a common challenge among these NGOs as this has a bearing on their capacity to facilitate the realization of gender parity in the country.

### **Specific research question**

What are the challenges faced by women-NGOs in advancing women empowerment processes in Zimbabwe?

### **Methodological issues**

The section explains the research design of the article highlighting sampling issues, research methods and ethics upheld in the study.

### **Research approach and design**

The article adopted the qualitative approach as it made it possible to capture the perceptions, views and the observations made by the study participants regarding the financing of women-NGOs in Zimbabwe. A phenomenological design was preferred to ensure that relevant and detailed information concerning budgeting and financial processes for women-NGOs is explored from various data sources.

### **Sampling methods and sample size**

In order to choose the research participants, non-probabilistic methods were used. While convenience sampling was used for representatives from women-NGOs in accordance to their availability, a purposive sampling methodology was used for key informants in order to hand-pick participants with the requisite knowledge pertaining to women issues and the financing of women-NGOs. Information on women NGOs in Zimbabwe were extracted from the National Women's Coalition Database where all women organizations are registered. In total, the sample size from both data sources was twenty-five (25). This number constituted twenty (20) representatives from women-NGOs who made up three (3) focus groups. For homogeneity purposes, the focus group discussions were informed by the mandate of the organizations. They were grouped into advocacy FGD, educational empowerment FGD and the economic empowerment FGD. The five (5) key informants were each from the ministry of women affairs, the ministry of finance, the human rights activist, a political and economic analyst and a religious representative. What informed the inclusion of the key informants was that they are all active in women empowerment issues and therefore have great insight regarding the challenges faced by women-NGOs in Zimbabwe.

### **Research methods and tools**

The methods of data collection used for the current study were the focus group discussions for the representatives from women-NGOs and individual key informant interviews for different stakeholders. The lead researcher facilitated three (3) focus group discussions which were conducted at three (3) separate venues. Three representatives from women NGOs offered to have the FGDs carried out at their premises. For key informant interviews, these were conducted at various key informants' offices in order to cushion them from the financial burden associated with travelling. An interview guide was used for key informant interviews while the focus group discussion guide was used to facilitate the FGDs. The questions on these two tools were almost the same except that direct questioning was used for representatives from women-NGOs while third-party questions were used for key informants, depending on their areas of expertise. Data collected using these methods and tools were thematically analyzed through the processes of familiarization in order to generate themes and codes.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study complied with research ethics in line with the requirements of scientific research. For legality purposes, the lead researcher obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the Higher Degree Committee (HDC) at the University of Fort Hare. All the participants signed the informed consent forms before commencing with the data collection process. The researcher also upheld the ethic of confidentiality and anonymity in order to protect the identity of the participants and that of the organizations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The paper is a discourse on the factors surrounding the paucity of financial resources in many women-NGOs. The themes discussed include downsizing and closure of some women-NGOs, the dependency syndrome and issues of limited coverage. These are discussed in the following paragraphs:

### *Donor-dependence syndrome compromising NGOs' mandate*

Findings indicated that most of the NGOs' operations in Zimbabwe were insufficient to fight gender disparities as the organizations largely relied on international donors for financial viability. The findings also revealed that donor-funding had declined sharply and that this was inevitably creating resource paucity among these NGOs. The lack of financial sustainability by most women-NGOs was also supported by key informants who indicated that NGOs relied heavily on foreign donors and that this created a dependency pattern which was largely compromising gender-responsive programs and processes which are necessary for the attainment of gender parity in the country. These findings are supported by the verbatim below:

*We do not receive anything from the government in terms of financial aid, no. We get our funding from international donors such as UN women depending on the mandate which is topical at that particular time. From when we started, the organization has always been door-driven but now the funding is now difficult to secure except for a few loyal donors and we are unable to provide the needed services. (NGO 3, FGD 1)*

This concurred with the key informant's response when asked what she thought about the funding and budgeting of women-NGOs:

*...the truth is that donor supply has declined sharply due to the overwhelming numbers of NGOs. The dependence on foreign funding means that without it, these organizations cannot function. Again, Zimbabwe is not the only country in need of financial aid. The competition is not just national, but internationally too, with countries such as Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi also competing for the same resources... So, organizations have little to work with really... (KI 4, Ministry of Finance)*

And another key informant agreed:

*...But the issue now is that they face dire challenges in terms of the adequacy of their finances because they depend on international donors. You find out that NGOs are now competing for resources. They are now leaving their mandate and running with any agenda that has funding at that particular time. Like during the times when the constitution was the talk of the day, every NGO was running with the constitution... Yaa, but, they are facing financial problems and as you know the government doesn't offer them any financial assistance... (KI 1, Ministry of Women Affairs)*

The findings above unearth the repercussions of a dependency syndrome and the implications of a decline in financial resources. These women organizations' operations are being compromised as they are diverting from their objective clauses to focus on topical activities that attract funding, an indication that the organizations are dependent on foreign funding both financially and functionally. The resource-dependency perspective argues that an organization loses its autonomous power in decision-making if it is donor-dependent (Kumi, 2017). This explains the shift in mandate by Zimbabwean organizations as they respond to funding patterns by international donors. When a government is reluctant to fund the welfare and developmental aspects for its citizens as indicated from the current findings, this exposes the NGOs to financial vulnerability which may threaten gender mainstreaming and developmental efforts being made by the civil society.

The findings of the current paper identify with Arhin, Adam and Akanbasiam (2015: 342) who revealed that 70% of African NGOs obtain funding from foreign donors. Additionally, Kumi (2017: 21) also found that 80-90% of African NGOs relied on donors to meet their financial needs. Sarachera (2016) further highlighted that there was stiff competition for funding in Zimbabwe and that NGOs desperately follow the whims of contemporary issues in order to secure funding for survival. This also resonates with the conditions in Botswana where at the height of the HIV/AIDS campaign, many NGOs had to refocus their goals to address the HIV/AIDS component in order to take advantage of immense funding in the domain (UNDP, 2004). From a social work perspective, resources and sustainability are critical for social development, without which the cycle of vulnerability remains unbroken (Twikirize et al., 2013). This therefore questions the stability and mission of these NGOs if they have to always shift their mandates in response to funding patterns. The continuity and sustainability of underway programmes may ultimately be derailed, compromising the welfare of women and the girl child. In line with the dependency of donor-funding is the downsizing and/or closure of some organizations as discussed below:

*Downsizing and/or closure of some NGOs*

Virtually all the NGOs' participants agreed that their organizations faced strenuous financial challenges and that they were resource-strapped to an extent of rendering some of their functions redundant. Upon probing on the matter deeply, the majority of the NGOs' representatives revealed that the issue of financial constraints was largely affecting their operations and projects such that they had to let go of some staff members in a bid to reduce administrative costs. The discussions from the NGOs' representatives further showed that some NGOs had to down-size from expensive rental areas to cost-effective locations. A few of the women-NGOs especially those in economic development of women and the girl child indicated that they had now moved offices to their residential areas because they could not afford to pay rentals. A considerable number of them had closed operations all together as shown in the women's coalition database. These findings are explained below:

*We just have to do with what we have.... We let go of some staff members and we try to keep expenses at a minimal. And of course, it means we can't do all that we want to do. We have to cut off some operations because it is just financially impossible to do... (NGO 8, FGD 2).*

And another representative from the NGO focusing on sexual rights advocacy explained:

*...NGOs who were once known for paying higher salaries compared to the government are now not even able to consistently pay their staff these days. Administrative costs are increasing everyday while funding is declining. It certainly affects what we are able to handle in terms of our mandate on gender issues... (NGO 20, FGD 3).*

*For an organization that is into empowering women in the informal sector, I know sustainability is crucial. And now how can we even talk of sustainability to these women when we are struggling to sustain ourselves? You know it's like we are fake or something (silence). That's why we have even moved the offices to the house, at our home. It's because of lack of finances... (NGO 16, FGD 3)*

The findings imply that without adequate resources, the services provided to women and the girl children may be compromised in quality or in quantity. This means that a lack of financial viability may lead to stalled projects and donor fatigue as some operations are suspended and the other staff let go. Start-up women-NGOs are more likely to close down as the giants NGOs through strategic alliance and loyalty relationships built over time may be better positioned to secure the needed resources. These findings are consistent with a study where the administration costs for three NGOs studied in Zimbabwe had increased tremendously as shown by the following unsettling figures: 7.35% in 2013; 10.4% in 2014 and 23.19% in 2015 (Sarachera, 2016:3). This shows an inverse proportion between income and expenditure; a scenario which diminishes disposable income. This then calls for adaptive and fluid mechanisms for women NGOs' survival as the attainment of gender parity in the country is pinned on their interventions.

Chikumba (2014) further argues that the scaling down and collapse of some NGOs due to financial problems compromised on the overall outputs. These findings also mirror those of Kajiita (2015) in South Africa, whose findings showed that most NGOs were financially incapable of meeting their documented goals and objectives as they had to downsize in response to the dwindling resources. Berta and Burger (2015) in Uganda similarly found out that NGOs were unable to initiate sustainable, profit-making projects and this led to some abandoning their projects half-done and closing down due to financial constraints. Social work practice, an eclectic profession therefore recommends the civil society to consider seriously borrowing concepts from the business community on how through social entrepreneurship these organization can self-sustain. Closely linked to downsizing is the limited coverage exhibited by some NGO and this is discussed below:

*'Skeletal' coverage by women-NGOs*

The researcher's intuitive observation suggested that women-NGOs were glaringly skeletal with many being concentrated in the urban area of Harare and its peripherals while rural areas were scantily covered. Only a few NGOs indicated having more than one office in the whole country. Apparently, these NGOs faced the challenge of poor infrastructure. Largely so, such NGOs were small and located in inconspicuous settings that proved hard to locate. The lead researcher provides empirical evidence on this as she struggled to locate and trace some of these women-NGOs. This makes it clear that many citizens possibly struggle to know about their existence and the gender services they offer, let alone their geographical locale. Findings revealed that this compromised on the impact as well as coverage of women-NGOs in Zimbabwe. This is shown below:

*Currently, we only have offices in Harare. We would have wanted to expand but the resources will not permit that at this moment. So, I can agree that the rural areas are kind of marginalized even though we try to reach out from time to time and also through social media... (NGO 3, FGD 1)*

This was reinforced by the key informants below:

*We may say that they are doing what they can, but most of these NGOs only have offices here in town and in Harare so it becomes difficult for them to be located or to help the people that really need their assistance. It is a huge struggle to achieve their core business... (KI 1, Ministry of Gender).*

Similarly, the human rights activist in agreement commented:

*Gender-responsive programming as it is right now is largely concentrated in the urban areas. They kind of just 'visit' the rural areas but they are largely based in towns. So the impact of women empowerment and gender equality processes is very limited in rural areas. Yet, those are the stronghold of patriarchy and culture which promotes gender gaps (KI 3, Human Rights activist).*

The findings indicate that some areas do not receive adequate gender programming and gender responsive initiatives that are necessary to empower women in education, politics and economics. This skeletal and limited coverage as a result compromises the impact of women-NGOs in their pursuit for women empowerment in Zimbabwe. Unavailability of resources therefore may lead to a dilemma in planning where women-NGOs may find themselves asking questions such as whether they should give little help to many people or more help to less people. Either way, as this dilemma portrays, the effectiveness of interventions by the organizations will be compromised and this may lead to the general population questioning their ability to actualize gender parity in relation to impact and coverage. The findings noted above are consistent with those of Kativhu et al. (2018) who reveal that NGOs programs in general are geographically located, with stipulated budgets and time lines which may deprive some areas from benefiting, thereby leading to skeletal coverage. Sarachera (2016) additionally posits that inadequate resources lead to lack of sustainable development and this limits most NGOs' coverage. A concentration of gender responsive programs in selected areas such as urban areas only deprives women in the rural areas from benefiting from these services. Ultimately, the attainment of gender parity gets affected. The political-economy factor is discussed below:

### **Harsh political-economy compromising women-NGOs' budgets**

The findings showed that the current political instability and an ailing economy is exacerbating the lack of financial viability for women-NGOs in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that this was mainly because the political sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe restricted NGOs from accessing funding for developmental purposes as such funders would be accused of funding a nation under sanctions. Apart from that, the collapsing economy was also cited as a factor which increases the demand of services by the service users. The findings show that the general hardship in the country meant that more people would need financial assistance for educational purposes and food security. This demands a stretch on the women-NGOs' budgets which are already dwindling. With increased demand, the resources are strained and this is adversely affecting the coverage as well as the impact of their intervention. This is revealed in the quotes below:

*Internationally-based NGOs that have remained are restricted from doing developmental and economic projects, just humanitarian issues. That's why many NGOs are into advocacy and awareness support because developmental projects require capital to start and also that international donors have been asked to withdraw support, otherwise they will be accused of developing a country which is under sanctions... (KI 4, Ministry of Finance).*

Yet another commented:

*The issue now is that things are hard for everybody. With this economy, things are going up and it means we have to spend more for example on a single project. The economy has washed away the buying power even of the United States dollar. At the same time, people that need assistance say with school fees or so are increasing. So, this is really putting a strain on us in terms of planning and prioritization... (NGO 9, FGD 2)*

The verbatim above are an explanation of how unfavourable policies can be detrimental to the financing of women-NGOs and ultimately the attainment of gender parity in Zimbabwe. Many international donors may not be in a position to increase their donations and this evidently affects the mapping of women empowerment

initiatives that are meant to change the socio-economic status of women. This is exacerbated by the fact that the government of Zimbabwe does not offer any financial assistance to NGOs including those that are in gender.

With the current economic challenges, this may expose more women to food insecurity and child poverty. The demand for the services is therefore likely to increase causing a budget deficit on women-NGOs' finances. Ultimately, some women may end up not receiving the services they require due to financial constraints. The resource-dependence theory then posits that the ability of any organization to meet its goal heavily relies on its ability to acquire and secure adequate funding (Kumi, 2017). From the social work perspective, the provision of services to the clientele can be compromised by the insufficiency of resources which can be in form of funds or expertise. As a result, the attainment of women empowerment may remain a challenge as this has negative adverse implications on coverage and sustainability of NGOs' interventions.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROCESSES

The findings of the study indicated that the government was only responsible for structuring statutory instruments such as the Gender Policy of 2013-2017, without providing adequate resources for the empowerment of women and the girl child in Zimbabwe. According to Mafa (2017) and the resource dependency theory by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), policies on their own are insufficient to bring any change if they are not backed-up with resources that can ensure their translation into needed programs. Funding is critical for the translation and administration of policies into programs that can effectively empower women and ensure positive outcomes. The findings reiterate the fact that Zimbabwe adopts a residual approach to social policy where it intervenes only if all other modalities have failed and that its intervention is minimal and temporary.

This however contradicts with the Constitution of Zimbabwe which mandates the government to ensure equality among its citizens (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). The governance of the sitting government is therefore questioned as it lacks the goodwill to finance the programs that are necessary for the attainment of national gender parity. Social workers as advocates for social justice (Zastrow, 2010) should therefore lobby for social policies that are aligned to the constitution, calling the government to uphold good governance practices which lead to social justice and the eradication of all forms of inequality. This may include gender-sensitive budgeting and the government increasing its budgetary allocation to address issues pertaining to women and the girl child. This is critical to increase pace and momentum towards gender equality and expediting the process towards the country's gender actualization point. The Ministry of Women Affairs and the Ministry of Finance may spearhead such discussions in order to make necessary revisions because gender inequality has adverse implications on the nation's development.

The current paper has also established that women NGOs like many NGOs, suffer a lack of financial viability (Kumi, 2017). This implies that the impact as well as visibility of programs and services being offered by women-NGOs in Zimbabwe continue to be compromised as there is a lack of the needed resources to ensure that gender programming and mainstreaming processes reach the grassroots levels. As a result, gender gaps remain glaring in terms of political recognition of women, accessing education, women economic empowerment as well as their social inclusion, especially in the rural areas where coverage is minimal. The information gathered from the Women Coalition of Zimbabwe's database revealed that there are only 79 NGOs dealing with women issues in Zimbabwe, with 65 of them situated in Harare. When the remaining 14 women-NGOs are compared to the rest of Zimbabwe, the issue of coverage may be a challenge as it may be difficult for everyone to access the required services. Critical and developmental social work practice is hinged on principles of inclusivity, gender justice and participation thereby highlighting on the importance of coverage for the eradication of forms of gender inequalities. Partnership of women NGOs, what is termed 'sistahood' may assist in maximizing on the use of resources and cutting on administrative costs. Apart from that, women-NGOs may consider a paradigm shift to focus more on developmental interventions instead of remedial methodologies emphasizing on community cohesion, participation and community management, assumed variables for sustainability.

The challenges of a donor-dependency syndrome demand that these NGOs undergo a critical financial shift, calling for decolonizing of the traditional funding modalities that rely on the western funders. This is because depending on external donors may invoke conflicting political relationships that may lead to external control of NGOs in Zimbabwe. As emphasized by critical socialists, the civil society should therefore come up with sustainable solutions such as social entrepreneurship, focusing more on local fundraising projects and the promotion of indigenous donors in order to resuscitate their financial inadequacies. Since problems are context specific to each NGO, there is also need to embrace dynamism and innovativeness to ensure the survival of women-NGOs. This is in line with the government's indigenization policies for example the Zimbabwe Agenda for Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET), which emphasizes on sustainability (Kang'ethe and Serima, 2014). Chikumba (2014) also calls for self-reliant projects and diversified financial flow by women-NGOs in order to ensure sustainability. Without these services offered by women NGOs, some women's hope to economic empowerment, accessing education and legal representation may be aborted.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study has discussed the state of financial inadequacy among women-NGOs and the implications this has on programming women empowerment initiatives. Women-NGOs in Zimbabwe have been found operating on “shoe string” budgets. This was mainly attributed to the decrease in donor sponsorship, the repellent political and economic terrain as well as a generally increased cost of living in Zimbabwe. Consequently, some of these NGOs are down-scaling, while others have closed down altogether. This has compromised the coverage and impact of women-NGOs as they are mainly skeletal to adequately close the gender inequality gap. Social work practice, a profession whose foundation is on social justice and human rights has been positioned to spearhead gender mainstreaming dialogues. Sustainable modalities with an emphasis on social entrepreneurship and resource mobilization have also been underscored as critical if gender parity in Zimbabwe is to be a reality.

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