

Gender Institute Grant Report

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Project Details

Women's musical networks, social support, and communication in African responses to COVID-19

Project timeframe: September 2020 – present

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Project Summary

In the Gambia, women's songs have long provided an important medium for communication and social support in the context of high levels of illiteracy and a cultural preference for oral forms of communication. This project aimed to investigate the way women have adapted their musical practices in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with the Gambia Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, the project engaged women's musical groups and health workers throughout the country to identify 1) the way women-centred musical practices of social support and communication in the Gambia have been affected by COVID-19 social isolation measures and 2) the strategies groups employed to sustain these networks during the pandemic.

The project showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has inspired shifts in women's practices of musical creativity and dissemination, including new forms of engagement with social media. In particular, the research highlighted the way increasing use of social media has affected the dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, authority, and leadership in women's health communication work. Social media has enabled women to share their ideas and their music more widely and to build new social networks. At the same time, social media use has reinforced gendered patterns of exclusion, with many women unable to participate in social media platforms due to illiteracy, lack of access to a Working smartphone, lack of money to buy data, or lack of access to mobile networks or electricity. Finally, the project has identified the increased importance of women's musical groups as familiar, trusted communicators in the face of widespread misinformation about COVID-19 (shared largely through social media) and mistrust of health authorities. The research exceeded expectations, and has therefore turned into a longer-term project, with further in-person research planned for 2023.

Outputs and Impact

The project findings will be used to inform the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare's efforts to improve the gender sensitivity and cultural relevance of their health communication strategies. In addition, the project report will be shared with other organisations working in the area of women's health in the Gambia. The research findings will also be disseminated through two planned peer reviewed journal articles. The first article will focus on the way women's groups navigate changing patterns of social media use and the implications for gender sensitive health communication strategies. The second article will present the methodological approach employed to engage rural and remote women's groups in virtual ethnography.



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