EMPOWERING WOMEN ECONOMICALLY THROUGH INFORMATION SHARING: EXPERIENCES FROM MZUZU UNIVERSITY AMERICAN CORNER Paper presented at the XXIV SCECSAL CONFERENCE Inclusive Libraries and...

Conference Paper · March 2021

3 authors, including:

Aubrey Harvey Chaputula
Mzuzu University
17 PUBLICATIONS   **158** CITATIONS

EMPOWERING WOMEN ECONOMICALLY THROUGH INFORMATION SHARING: EXPERIENCES FROM MZUZU UNIVERSITY AMERICAN CORNER

Paper presented at the XXIV SCECSAL CONFERENCE

Inclusive Libraries and Information Services Toward Achieving Prosperity for Sustainable Development in Africa

Hotel Safari
Windhoek, Namibia
8th-11th February 2021

Allan Kanyundo[1] Gift A. Dube[2] Aubrey Chaputula (PhD)[3]

[1]Technical Services Librarian, Mzuzu University ajkanyundo@yahoo.com

[2]Childrens' and Outreach Services Librarians, Mzuzu University giftdube1969@yahoo.com

[3]Readers' Services Librarian, Mzuzu University achaputula@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This qualitative study investigated economic empowerment of women through information sharing in Mzuzu, Malawi in order to establish their information needs, how storytelling has been used as a tool for sharing business information among women, and the benefits of story sharing as a strategy for information sharing among business women in Mzuzu. The study used the qualitative approach where focus group discussions were used to collect data. Data was analysed through

content analysis, and findings presented using themes. Findings have revealed that women running small businesses in Mzuzu need information on how to start a business, business capital, markets and profit margins expected. The study also revealed that women running small businesses in Mzuzu use storytelling at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library as the only formal means of gathering business information; and that through storytelling, they are influenced, empowered, encouraged, discover new business adventures, and develop a resilient spirit. The study recommends that libraries should consider designating spaces where communities can be meeting to share information to meet their basic information needs; libraries should consider having special storytelling programmes where communities share stories about issues affecting them in their daily lives; and finally, libraries should heighten awareness of the benefits of story sharing as a strategy for sharing information among people of similar interests.

Keywords: Women empowerment; information sharing; business women, storytelling; benefits

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) aim at achieving a shared goal of governments and the civil society of equitable and sustainable social-economic development among the citizenry. Sustainable economic growth at national and global level depends on women taking part in economic activities. However, the number of females participating in economic activities is significantly lower than that of men in all countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD 2011, p. 7). Gender equality and empowerment of women are preconditions for sustainable social economic development (United Nations, Bangkok 2013, p. 5). Empowering women in economic activities enhances their capability to access economic resources and chances including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information (OECD 2011, p. 6). Information is power (Blanchard and Nelson 2017, n.p.) and information sharing is empowering (Black, 2014, p. 1). Knowledge sharing which will interchangeably be used with information sharing in this study can take place through personal contact between persons such as sharing a series of events through stories and others means (Jasimuddin and Zhang 2009, p. 2; Tan 2016, p. 259). Stories help hearers to comprehend novel experiences and build up a general belief (Chennamaneni and Teng 2011, p. 3). Story telling helps

individuals and groups to connect with each other, share their experiences and reflect on a practice in a way that energizes and creates lasting bonds (Eyben 2009, p. 10).

Literature Review

A qualitative study by Murari and Nagarkar (2013, p. 4) that explored information requirements of women entrepreneurs in Pune City in India reported that women in business look for stories of how their fellow women started their businesses, why they started those businesses, and how they searched and accessed the information they needed. The study further established that information like consumer needs, marketing, and securing capital or finance were among the information needs of women in Pune City. A descriptive survey study by Adekanye, Aramide, and Adewuyi (2012, p. 12) that investigated information seeking patterns of Nigerian textile market women and strategies for improvement established that majority of textile market women in Nigeria needed information relating to their businesses and other life related issues, but they did not know where they could look for this information, and consequently, ended up relying on other people in order to meet their business information needs. Another a study by Mchombu (2000, p. 55) that looked at 'information needs of women in small businesses in Botswana' found that women obtained most of their business information through informal channels. The literature suggests that women satisfy their business information needs by using both formal and informal means, however, informal means are mostly preferred than the formal means.

Storytelling has been identified by several authors as a tool for self-empowerment, and as a means for communicating business information (Garretson 2015, p. 19; Juppi 2017, p. 34; Lindsay, 2017, p. 40). An interview by Tonaj (2019, n.p.) with women entrepreneurs on power of storytelling [an On-line forum] asserts that when people hear or share a story, somebody can be inspired to move outside of their comfort zone and maybe try something new. Eck (2006, p. 33) conducted a mixed method study that analysed storytelling as an effective tool in learning and communication. The study revealed that storytelling offers learners an opportunity to reflect on a new experience, contextualize their experience to other situations and decide how they can translate their learning into future actions. A number of authors (Reed 2012, n.p.; DaCosta 2017, n.p.; Theilen, 2018, n.p.) also attest to the fact that storytelling communicates the purpose of a business; markets a business brand in clear captivating and effective manner; taps people's emotions and genuinely connects

them. Storytelling has also been discovered to have the ability to raise value of a business product to generate massive returns on investment (Theilen, 2018, n.p.). This suggests that the power of storytelling is to inspire and empower others to think and act differently.

Several benefits have also been attributed to information sharing through storytelling. A qualitative study by Garretson (2015, p. 21) that investigated 'storytelling as self-empowerment: a case study of Association des Veuves du Génocide Agahoz (AVEGA) beneficiaries in post-genocide Rwanda' revealed that storytelling is a powerful tool of transformation and empowering because stories heal, restore hope, encourage and empower the listeners to believe in themselves as people who are can be self-sufficient and strong. A mixed study by Eck (2006, p. 20) that analysed the effectiveness of storytelling with adult learners in supervisory management revealed that storytelling builds more personal learning, encourages shared learning where people are learning together; approximate real-life experiences; produces personal commitment; can be used as a teaching and learning tool; allows listeners to engage in genuine reflection; generate new knowledge and illustrates how to do it. However, Garretson (2015, p. 17) observed that although storytelling has been used as an effective method for information sharing, its effectiveness depends more on the circumstances surrounding the performance of the stories. This, therefore, implies that effectiveness of storytelling depends on the right audience and the right circumstances that must be present.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the Empowerment Theory. Empowerment Theory posits that when the social environment grants people the ability to make change within that environment (empowerment processes), otherwise understood as greater access to resources-a sense of control and greater well-being are experienced (empowerment outcomes; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995, p. 45). It suggests that actions, activities, and structures may be empowering and that the outcomes of such processes result in empowerment. In this study, creation of an environment of information sharing through storytelling about women's business experiences is empowering.

Background

Mzuzu University American Corner Library was officially opened by the Ambassador of the United States of America on 24 October 2005. American Corner Library at Mzuzu University was established as part of outreach activities of the University. It is one of the sections of the University that is open to both University community and the general public unlike other services that are only accessible to Mzuzu University community. The American Corner at Mzuzu University primarily serves the University community of about 6,000 students, 200 academic staff members and about 300 non-academic staff members (Mzuzu University staff list 2018, p. 2 and Student Information Handbook 2018, p. 6). American Corner Library also serves the surrounding communities of about 160, 000 people in the City of Mzuzu and other users from the Northern Region of Malawi. American Corner offers the following services: education advising for those willing to study in the USA, lending of print and electronic materials, access to a public free Internet service, free Internet training, book discussions, workshops and seminars, meetings, exhibitions, storytelling, motivational talks, yearly commemorative events, English language teaching, debates and others.

Problem and Purpose of the Study

Libraries are considered as places where people acquire knowledge through reading and research and noise is hardly allowed. However, modern libraries are introducing rooms known as learning commons where users are allowed to discuss, brainstorm and share information (Chan and Spodick, 2014, pp. 252-253). Mzuzu University American Corner Library operates along this model. Among, others, users interact and share information on various issues affecting communities at large. Amongst the programs conducted in this room is information sharing through storytelling. Different groups of users that include women gather in this room to share stories about their experiences and encourage one another on a number of topics that include their businesses. However, no study has been conducted to assess how women are benefiting from these story sharing sessions. The purpose of this study is to investigate how women are being empowered economically through information sharing at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

- What are the information needs of women running small businesses in Mzuzu?

- To what extent has story sharing at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library helped in meeting the information needs of women running small businesses in Mzuzu?

- What benefits are accrued through use of the story sharing method at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library to meet the information needs of women running small businesses in Mzuzu?

Research Methodology

This study adopted a case study design that made use of qualitative approach research method. Data was collected through two (2) focus group discussions with women running small businesses who regularly meet to share their business experiences through stories at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library. The two (2) focus groups comprised six (6) women in each group giving a total sample of 12 women that were used to collect data, using focus group discussion guide. Data collected from the focus groups was recorded using a voice recorder and later transcribed in MS Word and was later analysed through content analysis and reported according research questions thematically.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Information Needs of Women in Small Businesses in Mzuzu

The first research question investigated the information needs of women running small businesses in Mzuzu. From the focus group discussion following information needs were identified: how to start business, type of business to start; capital needed to start that business; what are the profit margins; where to buy and sell business products (market). One member in the first focus group said,

"We learn from one another here at the American Corner what business to start, markets where to buy and sell our products and businesses tactics that are working for others. We also learn from each other business strategies for example changing of business products according to demand."

These findings concur with a qualitative study by Murari and Nagarkar (2013, p. 2) who explored information requirements of women entrepreneurs in Pune City in India. The study reported that women in business look for stories of how their fellow women started their businesses, why they started and how they looked and got information that they needed. The study established further that information like consumer needs, marketing, securing capital or finance and loan information were also among the women information needs in Pune City.

In a follow up question, the women were also asked where they get information to help them in their business. In the discussion, another woman in the first focus group said "there has not been forums in Mzuzu where business women are gathered to share information about their businesses. The only place that gathers business women together formally to talk about their business experiences is the American Corner. There, we share ideas, experiences and challenges about our businesses." Apart from the American Corner, they indicated that they get information from fellow business women, the Internet, family members and social media which are all informal means. This finding resonates with a study by Mchombu (2000, p. 39) that looked at information needs of women in small businesses in Botswana. The study established that women obtain most of their business information through informal channels.

How Story Sharing at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library has Helped in Meeting the Information Needs of Women Running Small Businesses in Mzuzu

The second question of the study intended to establish how story sharing at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library has helped meet the information needs of women running small businesses in Mzuzu. The following responses were gathered from the focus group discussions: women learn from other women how to start business; women share ideas and experiences through stories that empower them; women learn new ideas on how they can make their businesses to grow; helped them build a good network of sharing knowledge in their businesses. Another woman in the second focus group discussion had this to say,

"When fellow women are sharing their stories, it is touching, encouraging and influencing at the same time. We admire one another and are eventually encouraged to see the possibilities and develop a resilient spirit despite all odds. Our attitude completely changes"

These findings are consistent with (Garretson 2015, p. 19; Juppi 2017, p. 34; Lindsay 2017, p. 40) who agrees that storytelling can be used as a tool for self-empowerment and as a means to communicate business information. In addition, they point out that when people hear or share a story, somebody gets inspired to move outside their comfort zone and maybe try something new. In equally the same vein, Eck (2006) noted that storytelling offers women an opportunity to reflect on a new experience, contextualize their experience to other situations and decide how they can translate their learning into future actions. Similarly, Mamabolo (2014, pp. 41-45) pointed out that narrations of stories are influential, unofficial means of exchanging knowledge since they empower people to share their experiences and learning from each other. Although women benefit from formal gatherings like the American Corner, through the focus group discussion it transpired that it is difficult for the women to organize themselves and share information in the fear of empowering a competitor. However, the women have discovered that sharing information in forums like that provided by the American Corner is beneficial to them.

Benefits Accrued Through Use of the Story Sharing Method at the Mzuzu University American Corner Library to Meet the Information Needs of Women Running Small Businesses in Mzuzu

The third question of the study intended to establish the benefits of using story sharing method as a means to meet information need of women running small businesses in Mzuzu. The following responses were gathered from the focus group discussions: stories empower women as they get first hand experiences; women get instant answers to questions they may not have answers; stories are touching and influential; encourages women to be resilient; encourages them to discover new business adventures. A focus group member commented on the benefit to say,

"You get real life experience; in other words, you get practical experience of what somebody encountered or is encountering. What we share here at the American Corner is not theory but what

is happening or happened. Therefore, it encourages us because it is real to real where we get instant answers to what might have been troubling us in our businesses"

These findings correspond with a qualitative study by Garretson (2015, p. 21) that investigated 'storytelling as a self-empowerment: a case study of AVEGA beneficiaries in post-genocide Rwanda.' The study revealed that storytelling is a powerful tool of transformation and empowering because stories heal, restore hope, encourage and empower the listeners. Furthermore, storytelling has been regarded as a strategy for teaching children in educational institutions as a powerful teaching and learning tool (Eck, 2006, p. 20). A mixed study by Eck (2006) that analysed the effectiveness of storytelling with adult learners in supervisory management also revealed that storytelling builds more personal learning, encourages shared learning where people are learning together; approximate real-life experiences; produces personal commitment; can be used as a teaching and learning tool; allows learners to engage in genuine reflection; generate new knowledge and illustrates how to do.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed that women running small businesses in Mzuzu have information needs pertaining to the type of business to start, capital needed, markets and the profit margins in a particular business. The study has also established that storytelling has helped women running small businesses to learn business ideas from fellow women, share experiences of business ventures, and get new ideas that have helped them to grow their businesses. Finally, this study has revealed that story sharing is beneficial to women running small businesses because item powers them with new knowledge, influences them into new business adventures, and also encourages them to be resilient (not give up) in times of challenges.

This study recommends that libraries should consider designating spaces where communities can be meeting to share information to meet their basic information needs; libraries should consider having specials programmes of story sharing where communities share stories about issues affecting them in their daily life and finally libraries should step up awareness of the benefits of story sharing as a strategy of sharing information among people who share the same interests.

9

References

Adekanye, E. A, Kolawole, A. A., & Alogbenga, W.A. (2012). Information seeking-pattern of

Nigerian textile market women and strategies for improvement. *Samaru Journal of Information Studies, 15*(1&2), 12-22.

Black, J. (2014). *The power of knowledge: how information and technology made the*

modern world. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm805.

Blanchard, K., & Bob, N. (2000*). Sharing information is the key to empowerment*.

Retrieved from http://old.repertoiremag.com/Article.asp?Id=354.

Chennamaneni, A. & Teng, J.T. (2011). *An integrated framework for effective tacit knowledge*

transfer. Paper presented at Seventeenth Americas Conference on Information Systems,

held in Detroit, Michigan, 4-7 Aug. Retrieved from
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2011_submissions/277.

Da Costa, C. (2017). *Why every business needs powerful storytelling to grow*. Retrieved from

https://www.forbes.com/sites/celinnedacosta/2017/12/19/why-every-business-
needs-powerful-storytelling-to-grow/#13255e4643b0.

Chan, D.L. H., & Edward S. (2014). Space development: A case study of HKUST

Library. *New Library World 115*(5/6), 250-262. Retrieved from
https://doi.org/10.1108/NLW-04-2014-0042.

Eck, J. (2006). *An analysis of the effectiveness of storytelling with adult learners in supervisory*

management: A research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree Career and Technical Education, The Graduate School University of Wisconsin-Stout. Retrieved https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/5066850.pdf.

Eyben, R. (2008). *Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro-poor growth.* Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton. Retrieved from

https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/conceptualisingempowermentpaperforPOVNET.pdf

Garretson, L. (2015). *Storytelling as self-Empowerment: a case study of AVEGA beneficiaries in Post-Genocide Rwanda.* Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 2036. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2036.

Hughes, H. (2010). International students' experiences of university libraries and librarians. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries 41*(2), 77-89.

Jasimuddin, S. M. & Z. Zhang. 2009. The symbiosis mechanism for effective knowledge transfer. *The Journal of the Operational Research Society 60*(5), 706-716.

Juppi, P. (2017). Engagement and empowerment: Digital storytelling as a participatory media practice article. *Nordicom-Information 39*(2), (December) 31-41.

Lindsay, T. M. (2017). *Empowered storytelling? An examination of narrative transportation and Empowerment in Storytelling and its impact on millennial consumers*. Retrieved from https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/55830/PDF/1/play/.

Mamabolo, K.A. (2014). *Knowledge by narration: The role of storytelling in knowledge*

management. Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Philosophy in Information and Knowledge Management in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University.

Mchombu, C. (2000). *Information needs of women in small businesses in Botswana.*

International Information and & Library, 32(2000), 39-67. doi:10.1006/iilr.2000.0125, http://www.idealibrary.com.

Murari, D., & Shubhada, N. (2013). *Information requirements of women entrepreneurs in Pune City.* Retrieved from http://library.ifla.org/169/1/189-murari-en.pdf .

OECD. (2011). *Women' economic empowerment: Issues paper.* Retrieved from

http://www.oecd.org/social/gender-development/47561694.pdf accessed 25 September 2019.

Perkins, D.D., & Zimmerman, M.A. (1995). Empowerment theory, research and application: an introduction to a special issue. *American Journal of Community Psychology 23*, 569-579

Reed, S. (2012). *Empowering women through storytelling: Q&A with Sharon Reed,*

Innovative Change Agent for Social Good. Retrieved from https://paragonroad.com/sharon-reed-empowering-women-through-storytelling/.

Tan, C.N.L. (2016). Enhancing knowledge sharing and research collaboration among academics:

the role of knowledge management. *Higher Education, 71*, 525-556.

Theileen, J. (2018). *Storytelling for women's empowerment: How to communicate effectively*

in today's information overflow. Retrieved from

https://instituteicm.com/2018/02/05/storytelling-womens- empowerment/.

Tonaj, T. (2019). *Mentorship and the power of storytelling: An interview*. Retrieved from

http://www.womeninfamilybusiness.org/mentorship-and-the-power-of-storytelling/

UNESCO. (2018). *Empowering girls and women through storytelling*. Retrieved from

https://en.unesco.org/themes/women-s-and-girls-education/prize.

United Nations Bangkok. (2013). Empowering women economically: Illustrative case studies.

Retrieved from https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDD_PUB_Empowering-

women-economically.pdf.