#JUSTICEFORLIZ: POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN DIGITAL TRANSNATIONAL WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVISM

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For those who have access to them, social and digital media provide unparalleled opportunities for crossing borders of all kinds, allowing advocates for women’s rights to organise around, through, and despite national and cultural divides. In Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan’s useful and insightful definition of transnational feminism, it is through these very practices of border crossing—including interactions facilitated via digital and social media—that unequal power relations within and between feminisms are revealed (2000, 73). Indeed, in its discussions of these media, Feminist Media Studies has considered feminists’ continuing “struggle with issues of privilege and difference in online spaces” (Laura Portwood-Stacer and Susan Berridge 2014). In this essay I turn my attention to the specificities of this struggle in relation to campaigns addressing Violence Against Women, as illustrated by a recent Kenyan campaign called #JusticeforLiz.

#JusticeforLiz

The story of a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl known by the pseudonym “Liz,” was reported for the first time in Kenyan national newspaper the Daily Nation on October 7, 2013. In June that year, Liz had been gang-raped by six men, who then threw her into a pit latrine and left her to die. Thankfully, Liz survived and despite suffering serious injuries, she was able to make a formal report at the local police station, naming three of her attackers. In a series of grievous failures on the part of the police, the “punishment” handed to these three men was to work in the garden of the police station, cutting the grass. The police made no attempts to identify or apprehend the other three rapists (Njeri Rugene 2013). The news story, published online as well as in print, immediately caught the attention of Nairobi-based women’s rights activists including Terry Kunina at the Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW) and Nebila Abdulmelik at the African Women’s
Development and Communication Network (FEMNET). They began organising material support for Liz and her family, particularly in relation to medical costs, and Abdulmelik started an online petition demanding that Liz’s attackers be brought to justice. They began organising material support for Liz and her family, particularly in relation to medical costs, and Abdulmelik started an online petition demanding that Liz’s attackers be brought to justice. In less than four weeks, use of #JusticeforLiz spread the campaign around the world, with the petition gathering more than one million signatures, and a protest on the streets of Nairobi on October 31 making international news. Since that date, the campaign has succeeded in bringing Liz’s case to court, and drawn attention to the wider problems in the justice system’s response to rape (Equality Now 2014).

White Saviour Complex and the Politics of Affect

Evidently, using social media for campaigning offers advantages to activists. In the case of #JusticeforLiz, Kunina articulated how campaign activities that were previously costly and time-consuming had been made easier through the use of Twitter and Facebook. Equally important is the ease with which individuals are able to participate in a social media-led campaign like #JusticeforLiz. Additionally, presenting the campaign in 140 characters or fewer on Twitter results in an over-simplification of the issue in abstraction from its context. These abstractions and simplifications are of particular concern when African-originated campaigns cross national and cultural borders to engage a primarily Western audience.

#JusticeforLiz may have appealed to a Western audience precisely to the extent that it could be read in line with dominant perceptions of Africa. Tavia Nyong’o has described how participation in transnational social media campaigns produces what he calls the “global subject of participation” who affectively communicates “caring about” Africans (2012, 46–47). When #JusticeforLiz met a Western audience online, it entered a discursive field wherein “Africa” is associated with poverty, conflict, and AIDS (Nyong’o 2012, 41; Olatunji Ogunyemi 2011; Martin Scott 2009; Binyavanga Wainaina 2005); and African women are overwhelmingly represented as victims of male violence, qualitatively and quantitatively more oppressed than women in the West (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1988). Within this discourse is entrenched a white (feminist) saviour complex, positing that African women’s apparent suffering can be alleviated through white-Western intervention (Teju Cole 2012; Anne Theriault 2014). The dynamics of affective social media participation articulate with the white (feminist) saviour complex, so that participation in an online campaign is understood by Western Twitter users as a viable tactic to address African problems (see for example, #Kony2012, #BringBackOurGirls).

Campaigns addressing Violence Against Women in African contexts therefore risk reinforcing damaging stereotypes of African women, making it critically important to address prevailing Western imperial narratives about African women. However, to attribute the visibility of #JusticeforLiz to the white saviour complex of Western Twitter users would be to forget the campaign’s origins in the hard work of Kenyan women activists. Arguably, the #JusticeforLiz campaign successfully exploited the tendency of Westerners to take on a saviour role with respect to Africa, and to “brown women” in general (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1988). For, regardless of the wider imperialist resonance of the campaign’s message, the aforementioned global (Western) subject has a vital part to play in order for campaigns...
The activists at the centre of #JusticeforLiz, Kunina and Abdulmelik, confirm that they were guided by the idea of social media as a tool that, when deployed strategically, could help hold the Kenyan justice system to account. The speed with which the petition gathered more than one million signatures was largely due to their ability to reach a receptive worldwide Twitter audience. In a video documenting the #JusticeforLiz protest march, an unnamed Kenyan activist confirms that, “The best thing about [the petition] is that we could see that this person was signing [it] from Spain, from Mali, from Zimbabwe—it was fantastic.”

The Possibility of Transnational Solidarity

In transnational interactions between African women’s rights activists and Westerners, the white (feminist) saviour complex threatens to undermine the project of cultivating solidarity. Social media campaigns addressing Violence Against Women in Africa can unwittingly play into this dynamic, even as they also facilitate connections that can challenge and resist such representations. Given that #JusticeforLiz could not challenge the white (feminist) saviour complex or the dominant discourse about Africa, it serves as a reminder that “... there IS NO SUCH THING as a feminism free of asymmetrical power relations” (Grewal and Kaplan 2000, 4). Western feminists certainly ought to stand in solidarity with African women’s rights activists, but they must ensure that their transnational support and engagement goes beyond the mere use of a hashtag.

NOTES

1. COVAW and FEMNET also proposed long-term solutions such as gender-sensitivity training for police (see FEMNET 2013).
2. Online activity referred to in this essay can be viewed at http://storify.com/ETHiggs/justice4liz.
3. Terry Kunina, interviewed by BBC Africa, October 22, 2013.
4. Nebila Abdulmelik, interviewed by BBC Africa, October 22, 2013.
5. Video available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-D1F1NNF9g.

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Several scholars have written about the convergence on ‘the girl’ in the field of international development and its ideological implications (see Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill 2013; Heather Switzer 2009, 2010). In this commentary, I join this conversation by exploring the practices of activism, specifically hashtagging, encouraged by campaigns for girls’ empowerment, the kinds of publics that are created in and through them, and their consequences for thought and action. I argue that if we hone in on a different unit of analysis than the individual, we observe the emergence of a publics that engages in epistemic violence against women and girls of the global south by enacting a liberal feminist salvation narrative that has long been critiqued for being a handmaiden of imperial