

# Empowerment on Air: Challenging Gender Norms Through Participatory Radio in Northern Uganda

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**Abstract:** Mass media such as radio blurs the distinction between the public and the private. This article explores the gendered soundscape of a participatory radio campaign in Northern Uganda, which aimed to empower women and initiate debates on gender norms, including gender-based violence, teenage pregnancy, and women's entrepreneurship. Drawing on feminist critiques of the public and private spheres, we explore the impact of radio on women's empowerment. Ethnographic research found that participatory radio has the capacity to create a sense of community, an 'intimate public sphere', and critical consciousness about denied choices as a condition for further empowerment. Participatory radio also provides opportunities for women to deliberate and express opinions on public matters. The instances of political participation facilitated by the radio described in this paper exemplify feminist critiques of the supposed boundary between public and private activities. This paper thus encourages a rethinking of what counts as political engagement, recognising that intimate, everyday acts can contribute to promoting democratic participation and deliberation. However, radio's impact is ultimately dependent on access to and control over technology, political institutions, and public social life – which women typically have less of – and the receptiveness of institutions and structures to popular change.

**Keywords:** public sphere, interactive radio, women's empowerment

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In Uganda today, radio is both the main and the most trusted source of information amongst a population of whom only 10% are internet users (NITA-U 2022: 93; Twaweza East Africa 2023; World Bank 2024). Given its popularity, ease of accessibility, low operating costs, and capacity to reach rural populations (Macueve et al. 2009: 24), radio is seen as a technology capable of facilitating debates, challenging social norms, and fostering community engagement. In the region we studied, radio has a solid listener base rooted in its wartime history. In the war in Northern Uganda between 1986 and 2006, rebel groups, which later merged into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), fought against the Ugandan army. The local radio MEGA FM played an important role in conflict reduction. Launched in 2002 in Gulu City and funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID), MEGA FM facilitated peace negotiations and reconciliation efforts among populations affected by the war. One of the key programmes was the 'dwog paco' ('come back home') programme, encouraging LRA fighters to abandon rebellion, accept a government amnesty, and reintegrate into their communities (Adyanga 2019). Eighteen years after the war, MEGA FM radio remains one of the most popular and most-listened-to stations in the region.

The present study focuses on an alternative utilisation of radio than conflict resolution. What are the outcomes of employing radio as a tool to stimulate debates on gender stereotypes and social norms that perpetuate discrimination against women? A non-profit organisation called TRAC FM collaborated with MEGA FM and other radio stations to implement an interactive campaign addressing three key areas: teenage pregnancies, gender-based violence, and women's economic empowerment. Audience engagement was facilitated through SMS poll questions and studio call-ins, where participants answered multiple-choice questions like 'What is the biggest challenge for girls to get back to school after pregnancy?' One could ask whether answering multiple-choice radio polls through SMS engages respondents in private thinking or public deliberation. Indeed, even without the interactive polling, radio and other mass media could be posited as a tool that brings the public sphere to bear on the private, and an SMS poll potentially enables the reverse as well. However, we argue that interactive radio does not simply blur public/private boundaries, it reveals them as fluid, historically contingent, and constantly renegotiated. Building on hooks (2006), Young (2005), and others, we assert that rather than erasing the private, interactive radio reconfigures it as a site of political engagement and empowerment, while simultaneously challenging its assumed separation from the public. Participation and deliberation in the public/private sphere as a form of empowerment and distinctions between the 'public' and 'private' are therefore key concepts addressed through this study of interactive radio.

Within feminist literature, radio has been conceptualised as a ‘gendered soundscape’ (Järviluoma, Vilkkö, Moisala 2003; Ehrick 2015). Soundscape is, generally, the ‘acoustic environment’ of societies (Schafer 1993: 7). Radio’s capacity to transcend spaces and social contexts gives the radio soundscape both public and private properties. As examined in the following discussion of the feminist critique of the divide, notions of the public and private are central for the debates on gender norms; according to Michael Warner, they are ‘bound up with meanings of masculinity and femininity’ (2002: 23), associating women with the domestic or private sphere and men with the public. In the digital world, as Hannes Bajohr (2023: 869) argues, the notions of public and private have become not only increasingly blurred but shifted from ‘having the quality of a place or state to that of an action – a gesture’. ‘Publicing’ and ‘privating’ are, according to Bajohr, gestures of making a space public and private. As such, gestures are multidimensional actions made by the communicators encompassing psychological, physiological, and cultural dimensions (Bajohr 2023: 872).

While we agree that the public and private are not inherent qualities of a space, the idea of a gesture captures only one type of radio’s character in the context of this dichotomy. Throughout our research, they were not only meanings performed by communicants and interpreted by listeners, but also imagined spaces enabling different modes of engagement. In other words, the public and private are, simultaneously, ‘abstract categories for thinking about law, politics, and economics’ (Warner 2002: 23). In this article, we argue that the concept of soundscape enables one to conceptualise the public and private as qualities of a sphere extending beyond the radio’s boundaries. The radio broadcasts of TRAC FM have the potential to open the debate about this distinction, both in content and form, and thus also about gender norms.

In this work, we explore how participatory radio challenges the public and private spheres and the issues associated with them, as framed by three TRAC FM campaign themes. The article is structured as follows: In the theoretical section, we demonstrate the ways in which the public and private spheres have been problematised within feminism. While there is considerable overlap between the critique and our own position, we contend that the distinction itself can also be a space for women’s empowerment. Our view takes critical consciousness to be a necessary, but not sufficient, precondition for empowerment. Stronger forms of empowerment might better be located in women’s practices of engaging with the public sphere to influence sociopolitical structures and institutions. Subsequently, we present the research setting and the methodology employed. In the empirical section, we present three cases exemplifying three ways in which radio programming provides comfort to women who have experienced trauma or stigmatisation, fosters community activities, and enhances public political engagement. We then examine the impact of radio as a conduit for

community and public political activities, challenging the dichotomy between public and private spheres. Finally, in the Discussion, we evaluate the positive effects and limitations of radio on women's empowerment, as well as the barriers to accessing participatory radio programming.

## **Theoretical background**

Much has been written about whether public and private are separate zones. In addition to traditional philosophical perspectives, from Immanuel Kant to John Dewey, from Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas, the distinction between private and public has been a focus of feminist analysis. Carole Pateman (1989: 118) asserts that the dichotomy of the private and the public is, 'ultimately, what the feminist movement is about', as it has been 'central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle'. Any critique of gender must inevitably address issues related to the public and the private because to question gender is to question private life publicly (Warner 2002: 31). Challenging the public/private distinction has, thus, become a key objective within feminism at various points in its history.

### **A border dispute: public and private**

Jeff Weintraub (1997) summarises the feminist critique of the public/private distinction in three overlapping points. First, the two zones have been studied by theorists in a way that treats the domestic and private spheres as trivial or ignores them outright. Second, the public and private domains are themselves imbued with gendered characteristics. These characteristics are often gendered according to a common pattern, whereby men and women are assigned disparate spheres of life based on their perceived 'nature'. Third, by classifying institutions such as the family as private, the segregation serves to insulate abuse and harm from political and legal intervention (Weintraub 1997: 28–29). If the public sphere is conceived of as a domain for public deliberation and governance, the private sphere is, to a large extent, not subject to such oversight. By questioning the boundary between private and public, social institutions that are associated with women in these spheres, such as family or marriage, and phenomena such as sexuality, intimacy, and gender become 'legitimate areas of common concern' (Warner 2002: 33).

It is therefore unsurprising that some feminist scholars propose the complete abandonment of the public/private distinction. Given that '[f]or women the measure of intimacy has been the measure of the oppression', feminism had to 'explode the private', Catherine MacKinnon (1989: 191) argues. However, as Ronnie Cohen and Shannon O'Byrne (2013: 47) point out, other strands of feminism seek to uphold the

public/private distinction, maintaining that women's interests include privacy rights – such as reproductive freedom, freedom of partner choice, and the ability to make decisions in childcare arrangements. Importantly, bell hooks posits that the private sphere can serve as a conduit for empowerment (hooks 2006: 44). In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (2006), hooks critiques mainstream feminist thought for presupposing that all women experience private life in an identical manner, particularly white, middle-class feminism, which heightens the importance of escaping from the private sphere and access to public life. For women in postcolonial settings, the home and private spaces have historically functioned not only as places of subjugation but also as sites of survival, intimacy, and community building. This is also evident in our case study, where radio broadcasts facilitate women's education, enhance self-esteem, and instil the confidence to engage in discussions on sensitive topics in the relative safety of the domestic sphere. The privacy of the domestic sphere, in this conceptualisation, 'describes conditions that make the political possible' (Young 2005: 140). This insight is particularly important for understanding how participatory radio in Northern Uganda challenges gender norms: the radio does not simply enable women access to the public from the private but makes the home a site of political and public engagement while largely staying in the domestic sphere.

In the context of radio studies, some scholars have – as a supplement to the duality of public and private – put forth a third notion of an 'intimate sphere'. Recognising that who is entitled to engage in public activities, and the delineation of what should be considered private, is ultimately a power struggle (Lloyd 2020: 15), the intimate sphere has, in Justine Lloyd's view, 'the potential to operate as a third term that unsettles clear divisions and taken-for-granted hierarchies between public and private' (2020: 24). In this article, we do not attempt to replace the private with a notion of an intimate sphere, but to understand the 'dynamic of closeness and distance' inherent to radio (Lloyd 2020: 19), in which we observed empowerment (or its limitations) during our fieldwork. To denote this dynamic, we adopt Lauren Berlant's (2008) conception of the 'intimate public sphere', which we find fitting for the empowering environment that participatory radio offers to women in Uganda. An intimate public sphere is a space structured by shared experience and affect, providing a sense of social belonging (Berlant 2008: viii). Participatory radio creates a mediated space where private experiences are shared publicly, but participants/listeners remain physically within private settings. This creates a space where women's voices and concerns gain public recognition and collective resonance; but in a way where women can choose the extent of their involvement and address their struggles in a manner they deem suitable. Although the word 'public' may seem to reinforce the categorical binary of public/private, this is not the case; we use this notion to highlight how

shared affect and mediated participation expose the political nature of the so-called private. Therefore, we build on Berlant's concept with the insights of hooks, Young, and others, emphasising that interactive radio does not erase private qualities, but transforms the private itself into a site of potential empowerment.

### **Empowerment**

Notions of *public* and *private*, as well as *empowerment*, are terms that provoke heated debates among scholars. As with public and private, the utility of empowerment is contingent upon how it is defined, understood, and applied in specific contexts. Despite substantial criticism of the term, empowerment's complex theorisation among researchers enables us to frame the overall goal TRAC FM strives to attain and the affordances of participative radio to transform gender relations in general. In essence, empowerment pertains to change; Naila Kabeer (1999: 437) defines it as a process of change from a position where people are denied the ability to make choices. To start this process of change, it is widely agreed that empowerment is contingent upon the initial realisation ('consciousness') that the choice exists but is denied (Alsop, Heinsohn 2005; Cornwall 2016; Raj 2020). The interactive radio campaign of TRAC FM opened debates on sensitive topics, such as the stigma teenage mothers face when in school, gave listeners factual information about the health-related effects of contraceptives and the causes of teenage pregnancy, and shared examples of the economic entrepreneurship of women. Overall, the essential part of the programming was what many respondents dubbed 'sensitisation' of the community. But while gaining this critical consciousness seems to be a necessary condition, empowerment does not depend solely on an individual realising that their abilities are greater than imagined due to the constraints of, say, cultural norms. Empowerment is unavoidably about a change of power relations. A frequent criticism of empowerment strategies of large humanitarian organisations is the expectation that 'women should somehow be empowered to participate within the economic and political structures of society' (Rowlands 1997: 11). If the empowering process does not result in a transformation of the underlying power structures, it is unlikely to succeed. We return to this issue repeatedly.

### **Deliberation and participation as empowerment**

A step beyond consciousness, empowerment requires one to aspire to change the status quo and engage in the process of change (Raj 2020). One way to engage in change is to involve oneself in public discussion around issues where one wishes to effect change. Within democratic theory, this has been explored through the lenses of participatory and deliberative democracy. While often discussed separately, both traditions emphasise citizens' involvement in shaping political and social life. Participatory democracy stresses the inclusion of voices typically excluded from decision-making.

Deliberative democracy focuses on the quality of citizen dialogue. For Lyn Carson and Stephen Elstub (Carson, Elstub 2022), each approach emphasises either the breadth (participation) or depth (deliberation) of citizen engagement. In this paper, we view both the breadth and the depth of citizen engagement as desirable, aligning with Elstub's (2018: 186) finding that 'it is desirable and coherent to pursue a "participatory deliberative democracy"'. This framework challenges a clear boundary between the private and public and instead reimagines it as a continuum. Change may begin with private opinions and organically develop into political or social demands played out in street protests or voting patterns aimed at influencing formal political institutions. In fact, it can be argued that private thinking or intimate discussions are a necessary precondition for organic political movements, demands, and practices.

### **Deliberation and participation as citizenship practices**

If empowerment is defined as the aspiration to change the status quo and actively engage in the process of change, then empowerment requires citizens who practise both deliberation and participation. We consider participation and deliberation to be practices of an active definition of citizenship. Such definitions have been used in previous ethnographic studies of Northern Ugandan citizenship. Marjoke Oosterom's study of the effects of conflict on citizenship practices among the Acholi and Langi peoples of Northern Uganda defines the practice of citizenship as the 'individual and collective actions undertaken by people to engage in the politics of the public sphere, with other social actors and with state and non-state institutions' (Oosterom 2016: 75). Deliberation inherently possesses public qualities – one can hardly think purely 'privately' of 'public' matters. Deliberation, therefore, is a practice of citizenship that does not easily fit into categories of private or public. To train people in deliberation is to create empowered citizens who can better *participate* in the public sphere and influence political outcomes.

### **Deliberation and participation in TRAC FM's theory of change**

TRAC FM's conceptual underpinning is also articulated in the language of the public sphere. Ironically, our later findings will show that TRAC FM's greatest impact cannot be fully appreciated without borrowing from feminist scholarship that questions the public/private divide. Before that, let us lay out TRAC FM's theory of change.

Using a Habermasian framework, TRAC FM's theory of change aims to fuel 'a vibrant, empowered, and informed civic space where citizens articulate views and needs and hold leaders accountable when reasonable'.<sup>1</sup> The campaign's project proposal

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<sup>1</sup> TRAC FM. 2021. Application for Project Funding in the Field of the Promotion/Protection of Civic Spaces. TRAC FM internal documents, provided 01/2023.

further declares that TRAC FM's success is 'primarily measured by citizens' capacity to perform their democratic duty of debating matters of public importance' (ibid.). Although deliberative or participatory democracy is not mentioned, this framework assumes that greater participation and deeper deliberation are crucial for holding democratic representatives accountable. Furthermore, by participating in debate and discussion, citizens empower themselves to debate public interests in a way that contributes to the change of norms, behaviours, and attitudes.

TRAC FM's framework aligns with Nancy Fraser's model of participatory democracy, for whom the public sphere is 'the space where citizens deliberate about their common affairs... It is a site for the production and circulation of discourses which can in theory be critical of the state' (Fraser 1992: 110–111). Seyla Benhabib (1997: 9) also defines deliberation as an act of creating or taking advantage of better opportunities to think about public matters. The process of deliberation is what gives rise to ideal democratic citizens with rationally ordered preferences which form the basis for their votes. However, as she points out, such opportunities are not always availed or equitably available – for example, to women. When that is the case, the conceptual foundation of democracy as an amalgam of the rationally ordered desires of citizens begins to falter. In this view, TRAC FM's feedback loop of poll questions and corresponding talk shows aims to provide a 'better opportunity' for as many Ugandan citizens as possible to consider public matters where they normally have less access to information and capacity for engagement. This, again, shows how TRAC FM grapples with how best to combine aspects of participatory and deliberative democracy.

TRAC FM appears to pursue deliberative and participatory democracy in tandem, seeing no tension between the participatory emphasis on 'quantity' and the deliberative emphasis on 'quality.' Scholars point to this classic contention between deliberation and participation: 'Clearly, there is a trade-off between large numbers of participants and in-depth participation' (Carson, Elstub 2022: 18). However, these differences might matter more in institutional settings. As a small NGO, TRAC FM seems satisfied to promote both deliberative and participatory qualities among citizens without having to consider how they would play out in institutional practice.

TRAC FM's approach seems to build on Elstub (2018: 186): 'many citizens would welcome more opportunities to participate in, meaningful and consequential, deliberation'. Using Uganda's two most accessible mediums (radio and mobile), TRAC FM aligns with participatory principles of providing 'opportunities to those who have traditionally been silenced or left unheard' (Carson, Elstub 2022: 21). However, TRAC FM also aims for objective, high-quality debates, aligning with the view that '[d]eliberative advocates ... are process-driven rather than issue-driven' (ibid.: 23). Multiple-choice

polling ensures that deliberation is ‘on topic’ and that listeners are exposed to the votes and views of others, encouraging them to consider different perspectives. Within this narrow format, participation is open to virtually anyone with a basic mobile phone. Poll results are broadcast on talk shows featuring trained guests (usually with opposing viewpoints) conducting an exciting but rational and fact-based debate. TRAC FM’s model, therefore, attempts to encourage maximum participation while aiming to build civic skills required for robust deliberation among every participant.

## Research setting and methods

A man in a white shirt and black trousers is sitting on a wooden chair outside a thatched hut. He is holding a mobile phone in his hand. On the hardened ground next to him sits a woman with short hair in a patterned shirt, four preschool children, and behind them an elderly woman in a scarf. They are listening to a transistor radio that stands against the wall of the hut. Moments later, a voice says in the Lango language: ‘Please send us your answer ... Go to your phone and type WA, then a space, and then your answer’.

The vignette describes a Northern Ugandan family engaged in an interactive radio show put on by the non-profit TRAC FM. The NGO runs multiple-choice radio polls and related talk shows to discuss poll results on a variety of topics, with the objective of developing an informed and inclusive ‘public sphere’. TRAC FM is not a radio station itself but partners with regional stations airing in local languages across Uganda, cooperating with MEGA FM in the Northern region. At the time of research, the topics under discussion were threefold: teenage pregnancies, gender-based violence, and women’s economic empowerment. Radio listeners participated via toll-free SMS by answering multiple-choice questions announced on the radio. Direct call-ins to the studio were less common, limited by the number of listeners and the format of the debates. Radio hosts discussed poll results with guests, and the statistics were further used for advocacy campaigns with other organisations and the Ugandan government.

Unfortunately, the vignette does not depict one of our fieldwork encounters. None of them looked as portrayed above; it is a description of a promotional video of the organisation. Our findings indicate that radio listening frequently occurred in smaller, more intimate groups, not infrequently in solitude. Radio ownership was uncommon; most listeners accessed the programming via push-button phones. The participatory process was not as straightforward as it appears in the video either, as SMS polls occurred two weeks before the actual radio discussion. This implies that not all participants (those who responded to the SMS poll) were also listeners (of the radio show), and vice versa. However, the video depicts certain phenomena accurately.

For instance, phone ownership was more prevalent among men, most women sat on the floor in the presence of men, and the simple setting with thatched huts and mudbrick houses effectively portrays the typical settings of our fieldwork sites in rural Northern Uganda, Acholi subregion, where we met with TRAC FM poll respondents.

To examine participatory radio's role across the three themes and the public/private divide, we employed ethnographic methods. Fieldwork took place in Northern Uganda between January and April 2023 as part of both authors' thesis research toward masters degrees at the University of Amsterdam. During this research, we held semi-structured group and individual interviews with 33 TRAC FM poll participants. TRAC FM and MEGA FM provided participant phone numbers under conditions of anonymity for research purposes after receiving confirmation of research clearance from the Department of Anthropology. Consent for interviews was obtained in English or through local-language phone calls, followed by conversations in which participants were encouraged to ask about the research purpose. To protect our interlocutors, we assigned pseudonyms and obscured identifiable information. Following similar standards, one additional ethnographic account – that of Blessing, who appears in the Discussion – is drawn from TRAC FM's 2024 internal midterm evaluation activities. During this period, and the article's writing, one author was employed in an Evaluation role at TRAC FM, but steps were taken to ensure objectivity.

From 33 interviews conducted either in English or with the help of a translator fluent in both the Lango and Luo languages, we selected excerpts that best capture interactive radio's impact on women's empowerment and the public/private boundary. Throughout the research, we were struck by how overwhelmingly positive the listeners were about both the TRAC FM programme and the MEGA FM radio. As we show in the findings, the content itself was valued for giving women comfort and reassurance. But in addition, there was something special in the approach to the radio itself. Apart from radio being Uganda's dominant medium, we began to understand that MEGA FM has been instrumental in the lives of many. The war between the LRA and the Ugandan government displaced up to 1.8 million people (IDMC in Vorhölter 2014: 22) into internally displaced people's (IDP) camps. During and after the war, MEGA FM played a crucial role in maintaining some semblance of a public sphere amid severe social destruction:

*That was the peak of the north LRA insurgency. (...) People would always get information [from MEGA] and if you ask them, they will tell you 'It's MEGA that has been giving us hope!' You know, you are running away from your home. You go to the bush. You cannot even sleep because it is cold. Mosquitoes are there, and then the only thing you have is to tune to your radio in the bush. And then you put a very low volume, that it doesn't even go beyond 5 metres,*

*but you are able to hear what is happening. Where did the LRA attack again today? What is happening? What is the government doing for people who are here suffering?* (Bale, MEGA FM host)

In this context, we found individuals who turn to MEGA FM for emotional reassurance, social guidance, and hard information. Aisha, a survivor of gender-based violence, Mirembe, a respected and elderly woman, and Loyce, a women's rights activist, found what they sought through TRAC FM programmes on MEGA FM. We selected these three cases as exemplary for three ways that we identified among the 33 participants of how the TRAC FM programming offers public comfort for public problems, fertilises community activities, and fosters public political engagement. Through the findings below, these accounts show the programme's value for individuals and localised public spheres, with potential large-scale impact due to the nature of radio.

## Findings

### Public comfort for private problems

Aisha is a young mother who became pregnant while still a teenager. Her first partner abandoned her, and she then entered a relationship with a second man who became abusive.<sup>2</sup> After her marriage dissolved, she became a single mother. Especially in rural communities in Uganda, single mothers commonly face shame and stigma, family rejection, lost career prospects, and in the case of being teenage mothers are unlikely to continue school education (Webb et al. 2023). When asked how she felt while listening to the TRAC FM programming, Aisha replied:

*When I hear the discussion after the results, it is also encouraging me in one or another way. How to stay strong. Then, if I am single, it helps me to stay strong, the examples of how others are going through these experiences. She [the guest/host] tells how to overcome these issues and the problems we are facing.* (Aisha, 29 years old)

For Aisha, the TRAC FM radio shows – and radio in general – offered a supportive platform where issues relevant to her life were openly discussed. In particular, the show's focus on teenage mothers and the stigma they face helped bring a traditionally private issue into public discourse in a way that was both sensitive and empow-

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the sensitivity of the events, further details were not sought, and the interview was only taken as far as Aisha was willing to divulge.

ering. Although Aisha herself, at 29, was not considering returning to school, she found motivation in stories of other single mothers who had managed to make some money and not give up. Hearing others' experiences further reassured her that she was not alone in her struggles.

For the interviewed women who were teenage or single mothers, such as Aisha, campaigns like TRAC FM offer a space that is private, as they capture the personal experience of stigma and hardships that their position brings. However, due to the shared nature of radio, these spaces also entail considerable publicness. A particular characteristic of radio is the ability to transcend space despite spatial distances and thus to mingle the contexts of disparate social situations. In one of the oldest meanings, coming from the Roman notion of the *res publica* (Warner 2002: 26), the private is a spatial signifier in opposition to the public, representing that which is bounded by the walls of the home (Bystrom, Nuttal 2013: 309). If public and private are understood spatially, radio effectively breaks down this separation; both conceptually and literally. And yet, as hooks (2006) and Young (2005) emphasise, this does not imply abandoning the private but reclaiming it as a site of agency. For Aisha, having a home in which she could listen to broadcasts safely was particularly important.

Aisha lived under the protection of a relative who let her occupy part of the house in exchange for taking care of her two children and the household. The simple mudbrick house, comprising two rooms, stood largely abandoned outside a village, amidst the arid savannah of Northern Uganda. Like many other listeners, Aisha listened to the radio either alone or with a friend. It was evident that radio listening often occurred in solitude. Beyond the stigma attached to teenage motherhood, solitary listening in Northern Uganda stems from broader societal changes. Modernisation and urbanisation have reshaped Ugandan family structures (Stites 2020), while war in the North has displaced and torn families apart (Mergelsberg 2012; Whyte et al. 2014). These disruptions partly explain why solitary listening is relatively common.

In accordance with our findings, most people experiencing loneliness in Uganda are women (Nzabona, Ntozi, Rutaremwa 2016), and radio has frequently served as a source of companionship for those experiencing high levels of loneliness. Jo Tacchi's (1998) study of Bristol radio listeners illuminated the role of radio as a protective factor and an antidote to loneliness. While Tacchi's research was situated in a context distinct from Northern Uganda, her findings resonate with the notion that radio can foster an environment that is both social and secure, thereby enabling listeners to work on their sociality at their own pace (Tacchi 1998: 27). Clearly, radio can introduce 'private' issues into the 'public' in a manner that is both sensitive and effective. Joining the critique of the public and private dichotomy, the capacity of radio to open space for discussion of intimate, often silenced topics is, nevertheless, not a transfer across spheres, but a disruption of the very logic that treats them as separate in the

first place. It politicises personal experience, making private listening part of collective meaning-making and resistance.

Following this, we return to the shared characteristic of participatory radio. For Aisha and many other listeners with similar life histories, such as being single or teenage mothers, the awareness of sharing similar situations with other women was particularly supportive:

*It is encouraging. Because when they discuss, they ask people questions. And then when I look [figuratively, she does not visit the website] at the number of people answering the same, the one I have also answered, it means that I am not the only one. Other people are also experiencing it. (Aisha)*

Discussing sensitive or taboo topics related to sexuality, pregnancy, and family structures carries inherent risks, from misunderstanding to rejection and re-traumatisation. Self-exposure or exposure of others' intimacies, collectively termed 'intimate exposure', reveals 'inner aspects and places of the self and self-making' (Bystrom, Nuttall 2013: 310). Radio's anonymous participatory nature makes this exposure potentially more sensitive and safer. While there is a certain vulnerability in listening to a programme concerning intimate topics, whether due to others near the radio or the psychological impact of the content itself, the listener is not exposed to the *personally* evaluative perspectives of the communicators participating in the programme through that medium. In this sense, it is possible to speak of an 'intimate public sphere' (Berlant 2008). According to Berlant, such a sphere entails the sharing of a 'worldview and emotional knowledge' that is based on shared historical experience (2008: viii). As Aisha and some other women explained, knowing about others 'answering the same' to a poll question is highly encouraging. But despite the intimate public sphere being an 'achievement', Berlant argues (*ibid.*), it does not necessarily change the conditions in which the subordinate group find themselves but supports them by raising awareness of their commonality. Bystrom and Nuttall (2013: 320) describe the intimate public sphere as "'juxtapolitical" rather than political'. It 'thrives in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not' (Berlant 2008: x). For this group of listeners, whose attitudes are exemplified by Aisha, this intimacy serves primarily a function other than public participation in politics.

Some of the other women we encountered, however, demonstrated a greater level of political engagement – such as Mirembe and Loyce in the following sections. Besides, it would be erroneous to hastily dismiss activities as non-political, because as Marta Ackelsberg (2010) notes, our understanding of public and political participation is inherently gendered. In the context of public political participation, women

are frequently excluded from the male-dominated domain of politics. The structure of political institutions effectively renders women 'second-class citizens' (Olufemi 2020: 22) and disqualifies their participation. During our research, we observed forms of political engagement that challenge conventional definitions. These activities, we argue, represent non-institutional political participation and informal contributions to the community that exist outside formal political structures.

### **Community activities as political participation**

Mirembe is a 64-year-old retired mother of six residing on the outskirts of Gulu City in Layibi sub-county. She regularly participated in TRAC FM programming, providing responses to five poll questions, and even recalling district-level teenage pregnancy rates discussed on the radio. The overarching theme for Mirembe, in consideration of the campaign theme, was parenting. She regarded the issue of teenage pregnancy, which we discussed with her, as a consequence of inadequate parenting. In her response to one poll, she advocated educating parents and communities as a means of providing support to pregnant girls, enabling them to overcome the shame associated with returning to school.

Her life story offers an illustrative example of parental support. Following the death of her husband, she herself provided the financial backing for her children to attend university in Kampala (she described how 'we had to struggle together so the others could also finish university'). While Mirembe only completed the primary level of education, most of her children graduated, with her youngest daughter pursuing a PhD. Despite residing in a modest dwelling made of mudbricks and not being affluent, she was not as impoverished as most of the interlocutors we encountered. In her role as a mother and grandmother, she underscored the necessity of providing guidance to the next generation of women, a responsibility she fulfils through talking:

*to our girls, mostly now our grandchildren. It is mostly we women who talk to girls, so it is not men [that really talk]. ... I really encourage the mothers to speak with their daughters a lot! (Mirembe, 64 years old)*

With her sister-in-law Regina, Mirembe discusses the content of TRAC FM shows precisely because she 'also has grandchildren'. Her engagement with younger women and their guardians should not be framed as a familial obligation within the household or community, because such actions are also clearly political. 'For many community-based activist women', Ackelsberg (2010: 37) observes, 'political life is community life; and politics is attending to the quality of life in households, communities, and workplaces'. Mirembe uses TRAC FM programming to reflect on the upbringing of young women. Rather than situating her efforts within the traditional framework of

private caregiving, we recognise them as citizenship practices shaping gender norms within the community.

Mirembe's engagement with TRAC FM illustrates how even informal, everyday conversations – such as those she has with her sister-in-law Regina or with her grandchildren – are acts of public deliberation. Her advocacy for and expectations of other mothers to engage in involved parenting, along with her assertion that parents who fail to support their teenage daughters are 'very bad parents', suggest that she believes she has something to contribute to the public. She does not pass judgement on specific individuals. Rather, she judges a particular type of parenting or parenting practice that she deems detrimental to society at large. In this case, she is concerned about depriving pregnant girls of an education and, more generally, about allowing teenage pregnancy to happen at all.

TRAC FM poll questions, even when not accompanied by the associated radio shows, provide a platform for public deliberation among poll participants. But it is important to note that TRAC FM is not the only nor the first actor to raise women's issues in Northern Uganda. In the region, there has been a massive presence of international and national development organisations, especially from 2000 onwards (Vorhölter 2014: 23). That was evident in participants' use of terms such as gender-based or domestic violence, and their ease in discussing topics like underage sexual activity and contraception use. For instance, Dorothy, a 62-year-old retired teacher, openly chatted about her menopause and contemplated whether it might be associated with the use of contraceptives. It became clear that TRAC FM shows are 'just' one in the cacophony of voices being heard in both the radio and the public debates on gender and health. That does not disqualify, however, their contribution to offering opportunities for empowerment, either in the intimate or more collective sense. While for Mirembe and other local activist women whose stances drew on life experiences, the participative campaign offered a means to initiate discussions on topics that attempt to disrupt harmful gender norms and practices.

### **Radio broadcasts contribute to women's public political activity**

None of the listeners we interviewed were political figures like LC1, LC2, or LC3 officials.<sup>3</sup> However, a significant proportion of the programme's audience comprised women engaged in community work in a variety of capacities. For nine women of the thirty-three individuals interviewed, TRAC FM shows were not only spaces of intimate understanding and sharing of hardship; the encouragement gained from the programming made them continue to act beyond traditionally defined 'private' spaces. Of these nine women, six stated they were grammar school teachers who

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<sup>3</sup> Chairpersons of Local Councils at the village, parish, and sub-county level, respectively.

deal with gender- or health-related issues in their teaching, one was a social work student, and two were volunteers with local women's NGOs. While already active in community work in various ways, the radio shows – given how dominant the medium is – justified their actions and strengthened them in their efforts. Loyce, an activist of Thrive Gulu, the local branch of a USA-Ugandan NGO, was asked what the show provided to her, given that she is already knowledgeable about women's empowerment and gender-based violence.

*It makes me not to forget of my trainings, like the teenage pregnancy, and still add on it ... It makes me recall... Because trainings, we did it maybe once or twice. But on radios, at least after some weeks, they're still talking on it, it makes you even stronger. It has strengthened me. It has strengthened me as an activist. (Loyce, 40 years old)*

Loyce found the TRAC FM programming beneficial for two reasons. It reinforced her existing knowledge about the issues she deals with in her activism, and it provided her with a sense of confidence that she is not alone in her efforts. These two effects recurred among the nine women interviewed. For teachers, the broadcasts constituted a valuable source of information and inspiration for classroom discussions on related topics. One teacher, for instance, mentioned that she incorporates radio into her lessons (although the programme was not part of the TRAC FM campaign). Most of them mentioned how, with the argumentative support provided by the programming, they encourage parents to provide their children with sexual education and, in cases of teenage pregnancy, to keep them in school. The social work student highlighted the value of being aware of comparable initiatives. While she enjoys the work, it was apparent from the stories she shared that the cases of domestic violence or the treatment of pregnant girls can be drastic. In this context, knowing she was not alone in fostering community improvement was particularly important.

These nine women not only empowered themselves but also engaged in public debate and deliberation on sensitive topics. Their emphasis on having a supportive voice in the most-listened-to regional radio shows how inherently relational empowerment is. This relationality extends beyond a mere support network of familial and social ties and encompasses the formation of connections with actors outside local social structures, including development and humanitarian actors. As Mosse (2005: 218) notes, 'in development, poor people become "empowered" not in themselves, but through relationships with outsiders'.

Unfortunately, this very networking appears to be a significant limitation of the TRAC FM programme, particularly if its objective is to advance to greater levels of empowerment. TRAC FM, from our observations, did not refer listeners to local or-

ganisations. Some of our visits ended with the question 'What to do next?', and we were asked a few times about the location of our office for further guidance. This signified the weakening network that would support listeners beyond the radio programme. Additionally, the most common suggestion from participants for improving the programme was not related to its content, but rather to its format. Listeners frequently proposed extending the programme beyond radio to include direct engagement 'deep in the community', i.e. organising debates in person. They emphasised that not everybody possesses a radio and that not all listeners are necessarily aware of the programme, but also that they do not always have the authority to instigate a debate in the community.

From that it becomes clear that the empowerment facilitated by TRAC FM radio programmes was subtle but potentially acting on a large scale. Although some listeners claimed the radio programme itself motivated them to take action, the evidence that it can be attributed solely to radio, let alone to TRAC FM, was unconvincing. But this does not mean that TRAC FM did not empower anyone. In cases such as Aisha's, the shows allowed women to gain confidence and self-compassion despite the ubiquitous stigma. Gaining consciousness about denied choices, we argue, is an essential prerequisite for any level of empowerment. For Mirembe, Loyce, and other more politically active women, the shows were a source of confidence and reassurance, leading to more communal activities. Moreover, the shows and polls informed them not only about campaign themes but about the attitudes among MEGA FM listeners, engaging them in a public, community debate about the status and rights of women in Uganda. This matters because, as scholars note, 'Ugandan women, especially in rural communities, are still struggling with discrepancies between citizenship as a legal status and their lived experience, between entitlements granted in government legislation and social controls exercised in everyday life' (Ndidde, Ahimbisibwe, Kontinen 2020: 117). That is, provisions of rights 'on paper' often exceed or belie the restrictions of rights 'in practice' for rural Ugandan women.

Interactive radio broadcasts provide the basic but necessary first step of making women aware that they, in fact, have legal provisions for freedoms and rights which are not being actualised, whether due to failures of state implementation or enforcement, or due to the social and material conditions of their environments. Furthermore, the 'interactive' component of the broadcast provides a platform, argumentative frameworks, and public opinion data that allow women to express themselves publicly via SMS. Recalling Raj (2020), one may argue that this is the first step of empowerment. However, it would be equally fair to say that the TRAC FM methodology does not go beyond this important first but elementary step.

## Discussion

While radio is not a silver bullet for women's troubles in Uganda, TRAC FM's programming provides an important, albeit limited, avenue for empowerment. The campaign's impact is constrained by broader structural barriers to institutional politics. Despite these constraints, participatory radio facilitates access to information, fosters critical discussions, and creates spaces for women to engage in dialogue on gender norms and rights. The radio poll participants we spoke to were indeed gaining information and drawing on that information for varying private or public degrees of expression and discussion. This marks an important step, but it primarily lays the groundwork and does not directly instigate social or political change. TRAC FM does not directly empower women to take part in institutional politics. For Ugandan women to achieve higher levels of empowerment, the state's internal functioning, including the discrepancy between women's legal and actual status, must be transformed. However, we also discussed above how 'modest' and more private deliberation or even private thinking about public matters is a precondition for the emergence of organised political movements, the changing of voting patterns, or the organic formation of interest groups – the organs of change in a functioning democracy. TRAC FM's impact is strongest in producing the preconditions necessary for a public sphere capable of challenging the status quo – a modest intervention at the individual level can empower individuals to take the next steps towards systemic change.

This fundamental form of empowerment, that is, gaining critical consciousness, often does not allow for sufficient *formal* political engagement. Despite Uganda's reputation as a regional women's rights pioneer due to its legislative and policy measures, women's political participation and emancipation remain significantly constrained (Ndidde, Ahimbisibwe, Kontinen 2020: 107). Acknowledging the political and public qualities of less formal women's practices does not diminish the potent criticism that women face structural barriers to accessing the 'bona fide' public sphere and institutional politics. Radio programming's success should not be seen as a reason to postpone the tearing down of these barriers. However, it is still worth recognizing that TRAC FM's approach provides a platform for women to deliberate and express opinions on public matters – women who might otherwise not have had such opportunities. Interview quotes from a young Acholi woman named Blessing, who participated in a TRAC FM poll, are a good example:

*These men in the [family] meetings, they stop women ... Let me say when two people, a man and a woman, raise up their hand: they will point to a man to talk. They think that the woman doesn't know anything. [Q: How do they stop*

*women?] They [men] can just laugh at them [women]. Then maybe they [women] will just keep quiet. (Blessing, 20 years old)*

Blessing believes that this has discouraged the women in her village, family, and clan from trying to participate in discussions: 'They are very shy!' When explicitly asked if radio polls and SMS replies can help women overcome their shyness, Blessing responded:

*Yeah, for the first time [speaking publicly], I was very shy. Then it got easier and easier. I started when I was still in school. I was a compound prefect [student monitor], you have to talk to people so that they vote. So you are experienced even from a young age ... But radio is simple [compared to talking publicly in-person]. Because even if you are shy, yeah, no one is seeing you. (Blessing)*

When we asked Blessing if she thought this was a way of 'practising' public speaking to gradually build confidence, she nodded in confirmation. This aligns with our theoretical framing that practising civic skills, such as public debate and discussion, in fact improves those skills.

The effectiveness of the interactive radio campaign is not, as stated, exempt from structural barriers and is affected, in addition to social and cultural norms, by more immediate, practical challenges – namely, access to radio itself. As noted earlier, call-in radios are regarded as accessible technologies, having great potential as agents of change in reaching rural populations. Operating costs are low, broadcasts are free to listen to, and access is not dependent on individual ownership – people can listen in public places or together at home (Macueve et al. 2009: 24). However, while this is generally true, it does not mean there are no obstacles to participation in a programme such as the interactive radio campaign of TRAC FM. Although radio is the dominant medium in the country, access to it is hugely divided by rural or urban settlement, education, and gender (Internews 2021). In Northern Uganda, a significant proportion of the population does not possess a radio, and most interlocutors listened to the programming via mobile button phones. According to a BBC Media Action (2019: 3), 74 percent of Ugandan adults have access to a mobile phone, but ownership is divided by gender. The report indicates that 81 percent of men owned a phone, compared to 63 percent of women.<sup>4</sup> Women may be further constrained in their involvement in the programme due to the demands of domestic work, as Karen

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<sup>4</sup> These figures represent the average for the Ugandan population. The divide is likely to be significantly greater in poorer, rural areas.

Hampson et al. (2017: 643) posit, and may not have an equal say when devices are shared. Kazanka Comfort and John Dada (2009: 45) describe in a study from Nigeria how radio technologies have ‘acquired a social status that tends to emphasise existing gender inequalities’. Although we cannot directly endorse the findings from their study, where ownership of a transistor radio was a status symbol for village men, we commonly observed instances where the man was the one operating the radio or the mobile phone, determining where it is and when it plays. We also noticed that the restriction of women’s access to radio is not exclusive to the context of partnerships. Dorothy, a retired primary school teacher, stated:

*I have a radio, but sometimes I use my phone. ... You see, I have that last born of mine. I bought my radio, but he comes and picks [it], so I have almost surrendered to him. ... I have given it to him. He stays with the radio in his room. Now when I’m here, I use my phone. (Dorothy, 62 years old)*

Therefore, radio is a medium beset with power inequalities where ownership and access are dependent on gender and economic and social status. Nevertheless, radio is an important ‘enabling factor’ (Rowlands 1997) in women’s empowerment, as the research demonstrates, even if it represents only the beginnings of such change.

## Conclusion

Radio has the potential to reconfigure a person’s ‘being-in-the world’ (Bessire, Fisher 2013). Our ethnographic study found that TRAC FM’s interactive radio programming facilitates debate on sensitive matters, bringing gender- and health-related issues into public in a way that is both empowering and considerate to those facing stigma. Our theorisation of empowerment began with the observation that its premise is the acknowledgement of the existence of potential choices that are, however, effectively precluded. Attaining this critical consciousness represents one of TRAC FM’s strongest capabilities. By promoting discussions on the three topics – perhaps more privately than preferred – the organisation encourages the re-evaluating of gender norms. For women who experienced trauma or stigmatisation, the shows provide an environment of recognition and a safe space in which they can feel supported and resist harmful stereotypes. For listeners more active in community work, radio serves as a conduit for information that bolsters their existing knowledge base and buttresses their ongoing activities through a sense of a shared goal. Furthermore, instances of political participation facilitated by radio throw into question the boundary between public and private activities, encouraging a rethinking of what counts as political engage-

ment and a recognition that intimate, everyday acts can contribute to shaping civic identity and promoting democratic participation. However, the acknowledgement of the political qualities of informal practices women engage in does not diminish the fact that women face structural barriers to accessing more formal and institutionalised political spaces. Radio's transformative impact is further dependent on access to and control over technology, and women typically have less of both.

Engagement in the programming and the sharing of experiences with other women facing similar circumstances are facilitated by a space which we conceptualise as an intimate public sphere (Berlant 2008; Bystrom, Nuttal 2013; Lloyd 2020). This concept does not attempt to replace the public/private sphere and erase it of any private qualities. Our findings align with hooks' (2006) and Young's (2005) insights that the domestic sphere, especially in post-colonial settings, can be a site for political resistance and empowerment. Interactive radio, in this sense, is a medium that facilitates empowerment from within the domestic sphere without either requiring its conceptual dissolution or accepting the public/private as a categorical binary.

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