



“I’d Be Empowered If...” - Unlocking True Empowerment for Africa Women in Photography

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Abstract

Empowerment is a crucial driver of individual and societal progress. However, structural barriers often limit access to essential resources, trapping individuals and communities in cycles of disempowerment. This white paper produced in conjunction with the “I’d Be Empowered If” exhibition featuring the work of 10 African women photographers from 9 countries, explores these barriers while highlighting the transformative power of creative expression, particularly through photography, in redefining narratives and fostering change. By dismantling obstacles, ensuring equitable access to opportunities, and promoting collective agency, empowerment can be realized through collaboration and shared aspirations.

Introduction

Empowerment is the process by which individuals gain agency over their lives, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to society. While the concept of empowerment is often explored within economic, political, and social frameworks, its realization depends on access to fundamental resources. Marginalized communities frequently lack these resources, limiting their ability to achieve self-determination. The creative industries, particularly photography, serve as an avenue for empowerment by challenging stereotypes, advocating for representation, and providing economic opportunities. By integrating storytelling and visual documentation into the discourse on empowerment, photography serves as a medium through which identities are reclaimed, cultural appreciation is fostered, and justice is pursued.

The Process of Self-Discovery and Artistic Growth

Self-discovery is a foundational element of empowerment, particularly in creative disciplines. Photography, as a visual art form, enables individuals to explore personal narratives, push artistic boundaries, and initiate conversations on broader social issues. By capturing lived experiences, artists contribute to a greater dialogue on identity, cultural heritage, and collective memory. This process of self-exploration allows for the assertion of agency, as individuals define their own representations rather than conforming to externally imposed narratives. In doing so, creative practitioners foster an environment where artistic expression becomes a means of challenging norms, generating awareness, and reinforcing self-empowerment.

Challenging Stereotypes and Redefining Narratives

Visual storytelling serves as a powerful tool in dismantling stereotypes and constructing alternative narratives. Historically, representations of marginalized communities have often been shaped by external perspectives, leading to reductive and oversimplified portrayals. Through photography and other artistic expressions, individuals and collectives actively challenge these narratives by presenting lived realities that emphasize strength, resilience, and complexity. As the field of photography has been dominated by men, it has led to a skewed perspective on visual storytelling with women's experiences becoming marginalized or ignored.

Representation shapes our worldviews and when stories by African women go untold, certain perspectives and critical issues are missed. For Example, the impact of climate change on African women, a topic overlooked, is being documented and amplified by photographers

like Chido Nyaruwata, an alumni of the Creative Business Studio program by Unpublished Africa. Nyaruwata who also founded the NGO Flames and Lillies, uses photography to educate on climate change and document women's experiences. Similarly, Nyangone Tshimanga Sarah Naomi, another Creative Business Studio alumni from Gabon, tackles topics of pollution and waste. African women photographers bring unique perspectives and create sensitivities around social issues and cultural experiences that are unique to their communities, demonstrating a clear need to empower them. By shifting the focus from imposed identities to authentic self-representation, visual storytelling becomes an act of empowerment that reclaims cultural and historical narratives from distortion. A more diverse photography field in Africa, and in the global photography industry, will lead to a richer visual storytelling landscape, contributing to broader societal transformation by influencing how identities and histories are understood. This process not only fosters self-empowerment but also contributes to broader societal transformation by influencing how identities and histories are understood.

Overcoming Structural Barriers to Empowerment

Despite the potential for creative industries to act as a platform for empowerment, systemic barriers continue to hinder access to opportunities. Economic constraints remain a primary challenge, as financial limitations often restrict creative experimentation, professional development, and the acquisition of necessary resources. For African women photographers, this includes a barrier to the access of digital cameras which remain a key piece of equipment in the field. Even with the growing acceptance of mobile photography, professional grade cameras remain essential. Organizations like Cameras for Girl, operating in East Africa address this by actively soliciting donations to provide camera to aspiring women photographers and photojournalists. Limited access to professional networks further exacerbates these difficulties, preventing individuals from gaining visibility and recognition within the creative sector. The intersection of economic constraints and institutional exclusion reinforces the cycle of disempowerment, necessitating targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to opportunities.

The underrepresentation of women in photography contests reflects a broader gender imbalance in the professional photojournalism industry. The 2024 World Press Photo Contest reported that 76.88% of entrants identified as male, 22.05% identified as female, and 1.06% selected 'Other', which includes non-binary, queer, and gender-fluid identities. While the proportion of male entrants has decreased since the launch of the regional contest model in 2022, and the number of female, non-binary, and gender-fluid entrants has increased, significant disparities remain.

Additionally, the lack of data on the overall proportion of female-identifying professionals in photojournalism makes it difficult to determine whether contest participation is truly representative of the industry. This gender disparity is not merely statistical but indicative of deeper systemic barriers that limit women's access to opportunities, mentorship, and industry recognition. Without intentional efforts to support women in photography, through funding, training, and visibility, these gaps will persist, reinforcing a cycle where female photographers struggle for acknowledgment in spaces historically dominated by men. Addressing this disparity requires not only tracking participation rates but also ensuring that institutional frameworks actively foster gender inclusivity in professional photography.

Investing in the creative sector through financial support, mentorship programs, and accessible platforms is crucial in addressing these structural barriers. Sustainable funding models that provide emerging artists with resources and training enable the development of creative industries that are both economically viable and inclusive. Institutional commitment to diversity and representation within cultural institutions further enhances opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard and valued. By fostering an ecosystem where creative professionals can thrive, empowerment is not only facilitated at an individual level but also collectively strengthened across broader communities.

The Role of Community and Collective Empowerment

Empowerment extends beyond individual agency to encompass collective action and community-building. Supportive networks play a crucial role in providing creative practitioners with mentorship, collaborative opportunities, and access to shared resources. There are African women photographers establishing such networks and creating platforms that serve as resources and encourage community building. Examples of these include African Women in Photography, founded by Sarah Waiswa, which maintains a database of photographers enhancing their visibility and, Collectif Goma Oeil cofounded by Arlette Bashizi which uses documentary photography to capture the realities of life in Goma DRC encouraging and fostering a more comprehensive portrayal of the region. Such creative communities, when nurtured, act as incubators for innovation and resilience, fostering environments where knowledge-sharing and cross-cultural dialogue flourish. Black Women Photographers and Koz Collective created by Polly Irungu and Imane Djamil, respectively, encourage knowledge sharing .Black Women Photographers is a global community that addresses challenges faced by black women in the industry including those in Africa and it provides educational resources and grants. Koz Collective facilitates workshops and provides exhibitions as a platform for Moroccan photographers to showcase their work. Mbogi Collective founded by Sherie Margaret Ngigi is helping photographers and creatives across across Africa to leverage the crypto and blockchain domains.

Such collaborative approaches not only strengthen individual capacities but also amplifies the collective impact of creative initiatives in shaping public discourse and advocating for systemic change.

Furthermore, access to fundamental resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities remains integral to empowerment. Addressing disparities in access to these resources ensures that individuals can actively participate in cultural and economic life without facing disproportionate barriers. Through collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, and cultural organizations, holistic approaches to empowerment can be developed, ensuring that opportunities are equitably distributed and sustainable.

The Imperative for Artistic Freedom and Institutional Support

Artistic freedom remains a key component of empowerment within the creative sector. Constraints imposed by censorship, restrictive policies, and economic instability often limit the ability of artists to fully engage in their practice. Protecting creative expression through supportive legal frameworks and advocacy efforts is essential in ensuring that individuals can document and reflect their realities without external constraints. Furthermore, professional development opportunities, including training programs and international collaborations, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices, strengthening the global presence of creative professionals.

Recognizing the significance of the creative sector in societal development requires a commitment to fostering environments where artistic freedom is upheld. Policy measures that protect creative industries from economic and political suppression contribute to a more equitable landscape where cultural contributions are valued and respected. This, in turn, reinforces the role of artistic expression as a mechanism for empowerment and social transformation.

Conclusion

Empowerment is a multidimensional process that necessitates access to resources, opportunities, and platforms for self-expression. While creative industries offer a compelling avenue for empowerment, structural barriers continue to limit access and agency for many individuals. Addressing these barriers through targeted investment, institutional support, and advocacy for artistic freedom is essential in ensuring that empowerment is not only an individual achievement but a collective reality. The "I'd Be Empowered If" group photography exhibition directly addresses this underrepresentation by showcasing diverse perspectives and amplifying diverse perspectives and amplifying visual stories by 10 African women photographers, thus contributing to a more inclusive and representative visual landscape. By fostering inclusive creative ecosystems, societies can support the development of authentic narratives, celebrate diverse identities, and pave the way for sustainable empowerment. Through collaborative efforts, the cycle of disempowerment can be disrupted, allowing individuals and communities to fully realize their potential and contribute meaningfully to cultural and societal progress.

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Curatorial Statement: “I’d Be Empowered If...”

This exhibition, "I'd Be Empowered If...", presents a powerful collection of work by African women photographers, each capturing the strength and resilience of women within their communities. The photographers' submissions highlight women working independently, contributing to local economies, and caring for their families. These images underscore the undeniable truth that empowered women strengthen their societies. Beyond showcasing these powerful visuals, we sought to understand what empowerment truly meant to the photographers themselves, aligning with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

By asking "I'd be empowered if...", we gained valuable insights into the specific needs and aspirations of these artists. Their responses, alongside the submitted work, revealed a shared passion for documenting the challenges and triumphs of women in their communities. Many expressed a desire for greater access to resources, training, and platforms to amplify their voices. This exhibition, therefore, serves as both a celebration of their current work and a call to action for further support.

Through "I'd Be Empowered If...", Unpublished Africa aims to provide a platform for these photographers to share their stories and connect with a wider audience. We hope that this exhibition inspires viewers to follow their journeys and actively contribute to their empowerment, whether through professional opportunities, mentorship, or intentional support. By fostering a community that values and amplifies the voices of women photographers, we can collectively work towards a more equitable and representative visual storytelling landscape.

"I'd Be Empowered If..." Addresses the Following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- SDG 5: Gender Equality: The exhibition directly promotes gender equality by showcasing the work of women photographers and amplifying their voices.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth: The exhibition highlights women's contributions to economic development and supports women entrepreneurs.
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities: The exhibition aims to reduce inequalities by providing a platform for marginalized voices.

Photographers “I’d Be Empowered If...” Statements

I’d be empowered if I had more platforms to share my work . The opportunity to showcase work in meaningful spaces, where creativity is celebrated, provides a greater sense of purpose and motivation. These platforms enable me to grow as an artist, offering recognition and exposure that fuels my passion and keeps me striving for excellence.

I’d be empowered if I had the courage to be myself.

I’d be empowered if I had the opportunity to showcase my unique perspective through my photography, allowing me to connect with diverse audiences and inspire others to see the world in new ways.

I’d be empowered if I had the opportunity to learn from other well established artists as well as I start earning from my art to sustain and develop me.

I would be empowered if I could access formal photography training and get to interact with other female photographers around the globe to learn from them. I want to learn the technical aspects of my craft.

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I’d feel empowered if my work as an African woman photographer could challenge stereotypes and reshape narratives about Moroccan women, showcasing their resilience, strength, and financial independence through authentic storytelling. I’d be empowered if I had the resources and platforms to amplify these voices, ensuring that their stories are seen, heard, and valued on a global scale.

I’d feel empowered if my work as an African woman photographer could challenge stereotypes and reshape narratives about Moroccan women, showcasing their resilience, strength, and financial independence through authentic storytelling. I’d be empowered if I had the resources and platforms to amplify these voices, ensuring that their stories are seen, heard, and valued on a global scale.

I’d be empowered if I had the opportunity to work with organisations or individuals that tell Africa stories that revealing the positive side of Africa

About Unpublished Africa

Unpublished Africa operates on the principle that sustainable careers in the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) begin with accessible entry-level opportunities. We act as a facilitator, platform, and community, dedicated to supporting the growth of African creative entrepreneurs within the CCI. We recognize that access to professional networks, skill development, and market opportunities are crucial for creatives to monetize their work.

Through our work, we've seen talented emerging creatives face challenges due to a lack of foundational experiences. This understanding drives our mission: to create practical, accessible entry-level opportunities that help individuals transition from project-based work to viable businesses within the CCI. We provide platforms and resources, like curated exhibitions and programs such as the Creative Business Studio, to help creatives gain professional experience, build strong portfolios, and connect with industry professionals.

We believe that initial opportunities are vital. We've seen creatives exhibit their work for the first time through our initiatives, and then go on to achieve significant professional milestones within the CCI. Unpublished Africa is committed to reducing systemic barriers, promoting collaboration, and creating a more equitable creative environment where talent is recognized and nurtured within the CCI. By investing in these developmental pathways, we aim to contribute to a robust and sustainable creative economy within the African continent's CCI. We seek to amplify underrepresented narratives and empower the voices shaping the future of African creative industries within the global CCI landscape.

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