

Gender and Media in Africa – An Overview

In the media business, particularly the news media, newsrooms are involved in cyclical processes of information gathering, production and transmission/ dissemination. As already alluded to above, this makes the media become a consistent source of new information for most people. Thus, the media contributes to the shaping of our understanding of success, beauty and what it means to be male and female.

In order to maintain the confidence of their readers and audience, the majority of media houses like any other business commit to producing timely, credible and accurate news in comparison to other industry competitors. Thus, most newsrooms have as part of their guiding values in news production- speed, accuracy, fairness, freshness and balance clearly spelt out. Some news stations go as far as having slogans that claim to *tell it (the event) like it is*, while others purport to be *mirrors of the world*.

Despite these assertions of fairness, balance, accuracy and truth-telling by the media, the end product is always a *construction or representation* of reality from particular standpoints. All images and messages are carefully crafted with the intention of sending specific ideas, thereby making the perception that the media tells the absolute and objective truth - a fallacy. The views and ideas of the powerful people who have access to and control of the media are included and normalised in the media, while other views are excluded and consistently absent - these are called biases. Biases can occur in terms of race, age, class, gender and so on. The powerful and privileged people who include media owners, advertisers, politicians, media managers, media executives, editors and so on are predominantly older, middle class, (sometimes white) males. They directly and occasionally indirectly influence practices like newsgathering and the general production routines. In addition to the media reflecting economic, political and at times legal interests, media content also reflects a masculinist vision of the world and what is important (Gallagher 2002: 13). As already noted the type of masculinity presented as the norm is that of elite men. Gadzekpo (2009: 74) notes that in general there are very few female media owners in the world, but the situation is worse in Africa.

She continues thus:

Given Africa's enormous disadvantages in this regard, it can be argued that African women are doubly disadvantaged on account of their gender as well as geopolitical location. Not surprisingly, the emerging class of African media and communications technology entrepreneurs and film producers are almost all men (Gadzekpo 2009: 74)

According to the [Gender and Media Baseline Study](#) by the [Media Institute of Southern Africa](#) and [Gender Links](#), *there are no significant differences between private and public media in the quality or frequency of coverage of women's issues. Prejudices about gender in the media content are not accidental; they are a result of choices made by the gatekeepers in media houses*. In Gysae, Le Roux & van der Merwe (1999), Pregs Govender, a South African feminist activist and author notes: *"I think the media puts brakes and limits on itself in terms of who it accesses and who it regards as the people it should hear. So it must hear the convincing sound bite from the expert..."*.

At the global level, the media plays a role in expanding global markets by promoting the global *synchronisation* again of perceptions of beauty, femininity and masculinity, love, success and beauty. A few large transnational corporations (TNCs) increasingly concentrate and centralise ownership of global media. TNCs implant commercial models of communication that prioritise profit (because of its reliance on advertising) which erodes citizen participation in the media. Writing on global media, the Ghana born editor of the Pan African magazine, New African, Baffour Ankomah notes that *...journalism is slowly transforming from being merely a tool for information, education and entertainment ... to a tool used by the power centres of the world for their own ends*.¹

The global media system *is dominated by three or four dozen large TNCs, with fewer than ten mostly U.S. based media conglomerates towering over global media* (Herman & McChesney 1997: 1). Media mogul, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (News Corp) is one of the largest media conglomerates. Murdoch owns and has shares in the following industries; publishing, newspaper, magazine, music, radio, sport, film, television, satellite television, cable and internet. On the News Corp website, the company prides itself in *[c]reating and distributing top-quality news, sports and entertainment around the world*. It is interesting to note the admittance that their news is in actual fact representations. Also interesting is how they consider their representation of world events as being of a superior quality - one wonders what top-class actually means?

Several media scholars have however criticised this global media concentration as having a corrosive impact on media pluralism, democracy and cultural autonomy. Domatob (1988: 165) argues that;

If cultural autonomy is defined as sub-Saharan Africa's capacity to decide on the allocation of

its environmental resources then cultural synchronization is a massive threat to that autonomy. Indeed global cultural synchronization locates decisions regarding the allocation of sub-Saharan resources extra-territorially. Such exogenous developed techniques, symbols and social patterns are introduced more on the basis and needs of the metropolis of France, Britain and the U.S. than on the needs of the states. This cultural pattern of course favours neo-colonialism. Arguably, therefore, the relationship between sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world is an unequal one in which the rich, mainly Western nations, dominate the media both in terms of technology and content. Few African countries have the resources or expertise necessary to design, establish or maintain communication systems which would resent a true and appropriate reflection of their own culture.

In the context of broadcasting in Africa, Kupe (1993: 2) argues that in most parts of the continent the state-run broadcast media operates in service of the interests of the ruling elite. The elite turn themselves into caretakers of what they call national interest which in most cases is synonymous with ruling party interests.² Banda (2006: 35) notes that in Zambia, a media monitoring research conducted by Panos in 2004/5, *demonstrated that the dominant voices on the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation television (ZNBC TV) channel are governmental – ruling party politicians and state officials. Alternative voices are paid lip service* .

According to Ake (1996) and Ndlela (2003) most countries in Africa inherited and sustained sexist and undemocratic (italics are my additions) broadcasting structures and hardware that were set up by the colonial governments. Although the stations accepted advertising revenue, control and ownership of these facilities remained firmly in the hands of the state. In the context of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), Zaffiro (1985) highlights that at independence the ZBC was placed under the administration of the Ministry of Information, while the board and management was made up of ruling party appointees. The private press just after 1980, particularly in context of Zimbabwe was dominated by white private capital who also controlled the economy (Chari 2006).

In Africa, particularly during the era before the 1990s (liberalisation of the media industry), Gadzekpo (2009: 73) states that:

Editors and journalists who did not toe the government line were often jailed or hounded into exile and a caged media reported mostly government news and pronouncements. In terms of women s issues, it was often the first ladies projects and pronouncements that got reported, with few or no contending perspectives either from the individual women who may have been the subjects of the news, or from gender groups, activists or scholars.

In a report titled *The Glass Ceiling and beyond – the status of women and diversity in the South African news media* by the South African National Editors Forum the majority of decision makers overseeing production routines in South African media houses are men, with women occupying less influential positions. In a 2008 report on [Enhancing Gender Equality in the Media in Eastern Africa](#) (EAJA), only 3% of the total number of women journalists in nine East African countries sit at the decision making organs of their media institutions . In addition the chances for advances of women to managerial and editor positions is very slim. This means that women have limited control over policy on content production in newsrooms.

Citing the work of (Abbam 1975), Gadzekpo (2009: 71) notes the following:

In Ghana, for example, a women s magazine publisher, Kate Abbam, raised the issue of women s status in media organizations. Abbam observed that only two of the 71 female employees at the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) were in decision making positions and argued that women were concentrated at the bottom end of the organization and were rarely to be found in middle or top management.

Recent media monitoring reports of the news media at the global, Southern and East African levels show that in newsrooms, women journalists are generally assigned to soft issues like beauty, health and other social events while men are given hard news issues which include politics and the economy. In relation to news content, men are more likely to feature as news sources compared to women. The voice of authority provided by middle aged, professional men usually supports the existing power structures in society. *This is regardless of the fact that women make up the majority of media consumers, little attention is paid to what they would be interested in knowing* (My Views on the News! study by Gender Links). Gallagher (2002: 12) argues that *this tendency to ignore women or - at best - to talk about, rather than to or through women is deeply embedded in the normative cultural practises that filter into newsroom cultures and routines.*

This is in contrast to advertising where, Lowe Morna & Ndlovu (2007) noted that women are more likely to feature in advertisements than in news. Having said that, it is important to also say that when women appear in the media (news and advertising included) they are stereotypically presented as sex objects, beauty objects, contestants, victims, sex workers and responsible homemakers.³ The 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project showed that

stories are more likely to reinforce than challenge stereotypes about gender.

The research on gender and advertising in Southern Africa (by Gender Links) highlights that: *Advertisements perpetuate gender stereotypes to a very large extent with 62% of monitored adverts portraying women and men in stereotypical ways. The study found that women appear more in domestic settings for example home-maker at 58%, parent/ caregiver (80%), domestic worker/ gardener (76%). When they appear outdoors, the emphasis is on their femininity, for instance as beauty queens at 84%. When men appear in advertisements, they are portrayed more in professional roles at 67%; as business people (62%), sales people/marketers at (66%) and politicians (68%).*⁴

On the surface, advertisements sell products; a deeper analysis however would reveal that advertisements also sell worldviews and concepts of success, beauty, elegance, love and sexuality, creating a mass culture. The advertising industry has for long thrived on normalising ideas of who we should be. In order to achieve this state of perfection, audiences are turned into life long consumers (with specific tastes) feeding into the capitalist system. Global advertising has worsened the situation by trying to homogenise tastes around the world ensuring a ready market for manufactured products. Women for example have to buy imported and expensive beauty products to avoid wrinkles and blemishes as well as eat the advertised foods to have the slender bodies. Female audiences are perpetually made to feel a combination emotions; inadequacy, guilt and admiration of the other (flawless young, thin, beautiful) women in advertisements. In other parts of the world, this constricted view of the perfect woman portrayed in advertisements exacerbates problems like anorexia in teenage girls.

The objectification, domestication and eroticisation of women does not encourage audiences in general to view and respect women as citizens who can also input meaningfully to national discourses. Most photographs of women in religious media monitored by the [Southern African Media and Gender Institute](#) showed women in the context of their husbands and families. In a number of cases their own names were not mentioned except as *the wife of certain leaders*. This gaze at women as the *sex kitten*, the inferior and weaker *other* contributes to the worsening of social problems like Violence Against Women.

A research by the Harare-based [African Fathers Initiative](#) concluded that, *African men's roles as fathers are, generally, not positively foregrounded in media except where explicitly messaging a lifestyle role pertaining to an advertising campaign that markets the values of involved parenting and family. Negative stereotypes abound in other media templates such as news, opinion and feature genres.*⁵ In advertising, men are mostly stereotypically depicted as strong, muscular and virile. Increasingly, these stereotypes about men also fuel feelings of inadequacy in men.

Writing in the context of the Nigerian home video films and the portrayal of women, Okunna (1996) observes that the images of women are stereotypical in nature and are likely to negatively influence the perception of among many viewers, the female audiences. Stereotyping reduces complex situations and people into simplistic, easily-recognised, memorable categories and conforming to societal expectations. Although there have been attempts to justify using stereotypes in news (for example, stereotypes are handy in light of tight time deadlines in news production), I still contend that any form of stereotyping is dangerous as it stimulates prejudice and inequality justifying the position of those in authority. Media Monitoring Africa observed that, on a daily basis, issues concerning the rights of women are rarely covered except towards significant days like Women's Day.⁶ In everyday reporting, women are more likely to make the headlines when they deviate from the expected societal norms of being the super mothers and patient wives. Media Monitoring Africa flags some of the following headlines as illustrations: "Wife kills husband over R180" (The Daily Sun 16 January 2007, p.2), "Family murders highlight our fraying social fabric" (Sunday Times 14 January 2007, p 25).

Some categories of women get less attention from the media, for example elderly women, women with disabilities and women with different sexual orientations. In Gysae, Le Roux & van der Merwe (1999), Shelley Barry, one of the interviewees as well as the Equity Officer at South Africa's ETV narrated that after a road accident left her in a wheel chair all the television channels she watched while in hospital did not have any people with disabilities. She was searching unsuccessfully for some form of reference point of how her life might be after she was discharged from hospital. She continued thus, *"If you are not validated in the media, you internalise that invisibility and you think I am not good enough to be out there"*. Another activist, Anthea Carolus, speaking in Gysae, Le Roux & van der Merwe (1999), aptly summarises the double-edged nature of media representations of women: *"... for me the problem is how they are showing women and what they are not showing about women too"*. In addition to media house cultures and media managers who have defined the practice of journalism from a male perspective and are hence contributing to gender-biased reporting, Rabe (2006) however adds that the journalists' preconceived gender prejudices also contribute to this distorted reporting.

Journalism training institutions on the continent have also been taken to task by activists for their gender blind curricula that do not cover issues of gender sensitive reporting.⁷ Writing on journalism curricula in general in post-colonial Africa, Domatob (1988) argues that they were inherited from the colonial era. These curricula often taught in European languages (French, Portuguese and English) cover issues based on Western experiences. Musa (2009: 35) continues thus: *the replications of curricula from Western universities, as well as the training of many African scholars in the field of communication and media studies, (italics are my additions) were major factors in the reproduction of some conservative scholarship in communication and media studies* .

Thus, Gadzekpo (2009: 78) postulates that, *Gender and media courses [that are] still missing in a lot of African mass media schools and departments and in gender/ women studies departments, must be included*. Gadzekpo (2009) adds that the curriculum of these courses (Gender and media courses) can be a collaboration between academics and non-academics. At the beginning of this essay, I postulated that media texts are constructed from positions of power and affluence of the dominant male elite, now I argue that these same texts can be deconstructed and reconstructed again; and that from an inclusive standpoint that takes gender equality seriously. This same process can also apply to other categories like race, ethnicity and age and so on. The processes of challenging the status quo and recreating a new reality have been at the centre of the women's movement for a long time. Thus, in the context of women's marginalisation and victimhood image in the media, activism and research by women on media can be traced back to the United Nations first International Decade for Women (1975-1985).⁸ Gallagher (2002) however notes that the early years of international women's movement, media issues were regarded as secondary in importance to issues like poverty, education and health for women. Thus the 1995 United Nations official recognition (in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action) of the importance of media monitoring as tool to scrutinize the media to ensure that women's concerns are reflected in the media became a watershed point.

Some of the several regional initiatives that have generally carried forward the principles of equality and non-discrimination between men and women are the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (The African Women's Protocol) adopted in 2003. At sub-regional level, the signing by the SADC Heads of States of the Protocol on Gender and Development (in August 2008) elevated the 1997 Declaration on Gender and Development into concrete, time-bound and legally binding actions. Articles 29-31 of the [Protocol](#) specifically call for gender equality in media content and the challenging of gender stereotypes.

Together with other organisations around the world, gender and media organisations, university departments and individuals in Africa have consistently taken part in the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) exercises coordinated by the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) since 1995. The GMMP occurs after every five years looks at women, men and the news around the world on a particular day. The study brings forth mainly quantitative data from different regions, thereby making comparisons possible. Of the 76 countries that took part in the 2005 GMMP, 18 of them were African countries. In the interim, non-governmental organisations carry out media monitoring exercises on particular topics.

In Southern Africa, the study by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and Gender Links (Gender and Media Baseline Study) has provided valuable detailed data on gender representations in media in the region. The 2002 study covered media in 12 countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

Other organisations have also carried out country specific media monitoring exercises. The [Panos Southern Africa](#) media monitoring project monitored news content on the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) between 2004/5 in which the results showed a gross under representation of women. The Zimbabwe chapter of the MISA did research on the coverage of women political candidates in the media during the 2008 harmonised elections and produced a publication titled, [Walking the Talk. Media Monitoring Africa](#) has among many monitoring exercises looked at the media reporting of gender issues during the 16 days of Activism against Gender Based Violence. As a follow up to a report by the Medical Research Council (MRC) in 2004 that concluded that in South Africa, every six hours a woman is killed by an intimate partner, the <http://samgi.org/> monitored the reporting of intimate femicide in media in the Western Cape (one of the provinces of South Africa). Despite the MRC's shocking findings, the monitoring by SAMGI revealed that intimate femicide is not newsworthy to the media. In another media monitoring exercise, SAMGI looked at the gender representations in religious media. These reports have been important for activists because they provide the much needed evidence regarding gender disparities in media content useful when advocating and lobbying for equality in the media to different stakeholders. The research findings also make raising the public's consciousness on the issues easier.

The decade after the Beijing Platform for Action brought NICTs into the information and communications arena. According to Wanyeki (2002: 10), in relation to the women's movement, the emergence of NICTs has had both positive and negative implications. She notes thus: *[t]he connectedness of activists in space and time on the continent has increased dramatically with the introduction of technologies such as internet. However, one real challenge that remains is that women mainly do not have access to the internet* (Wanyeki 2002: 10).

On the issue of gender justice, managerial positions and content, the NICTs have not performed better than their old media counterparts. Women still do not occupy decisionmaking positions (Gallagher 2002: 19). According to Lowe Morna & Khan (2000: 29), *cyber sex, which feeds on the objectification of women's bodies, pornography and child pornography are among the fastest growing and most lucrative dimensions on the Internet*. Thus, Wanyeki (2002) posits that: *one of the key concerns is the lack of policy framework governing content creation and representation of women in the new media*. As already suggested by the research cited above, several gender and media organisations exist in different countries. Some of the organisations work in specific countries in which they are registered, while others have projects that span over several countries. In Southern Africa for example, these organisations include Gender Links, Gender and Media in Southern Africa (GEMSA), Southern African Media and Gender Institute (SAMGI), Media Monitoring Africa, Federation of African Media Women (FAMW), the Zambia Media Women Association (ZAMWA) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (chapters in Southern Africa e.g. Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana, and Swaziland).

In East Africa organisations and associations like the <http://www.awcfs.org/>, Association of Media Women of Kenya (AMWK), the East African Journalists Association, the Ethiopian Media Women's Association (EMWA), the Tanzanian Media Women's Association (TAMWA) and the Ugandan Media Women's Association (UMWA) continue to push for gender justice in the media.

In the West of Africa, Inter-African Network for Women, Media, Gender and Development (FAMEDEV) for example has organised a gender and media advocacy training workshop for representatives from women's NGOs and other groups concerned with gender and media from French-speaking sub-Saharan African countries.

Strategies used by some of the aforementioned organisations have been multifaceted. They include working with media managers and editors, collaborating with journalism training institutions as well as training media literacy courses to media audiences.