



When media becomes weapon of war against gender progress

By Pinkie Mekgwe

Abstract

The media is two-pronged. As an information mediator, it has real potential for generating crucial knowledge for the advancement of societies. As such, it can prove an arsenal for the gender-equality and gender justice causes and effectively contribute to a meaningful transformation of myriad lives. In the wrong hands, however, and put to careless, thoughtless, shallow and/or outright vicious use, the media becomes an insidious perpetrator eroding significant victories scored by human rights activists, gender activists, and such like-minded humanists. The latter trend seems alarmingly on the increase. The recent flowering of tabloid media across the globe is combined with the upsurge of the bold, ubiquitous nature of a seemingly ethics-averse new "citizen" media, especially in the form of You-tube as well as various multifarious and multi-natured blogs, and other such sites.

Key words

Gender and media, citizen media, human rights

Questionable photographs

In recent history, the media industry has experienced a number of incidents that should encourage media analysts, commentator, and regulators, as well as gender and human rights activists pause and reflect on the current state of media in the region. One such incident that merits discussion is the case of a photographer who snapped the unassisted, public birthing of a breech baby in Zambia, which received interesting comment from Rashweat Mukundu of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) as published on the Gender Links website (www.genderlinks.org.za).

The pictures were disseminated (not published) by the *Post* Newspaper of Zambia, in a bid, as the editor was to later explain, to draw attention to the dismal state of health care in Zambia, at a time when health workers had chosen to go on strike.

While Mukundu is convinced that this was a good cause there are some potential questions about the "nature" of the cause. It is crucial that our mode of work be sanctioned by ethical concerns. The Codes of Ethics for Journalists in blanket reference requires

particular sensitivity to women and minors, and points to the need always to seek permission of the subject of a photo shoot.

Did the woman who painfully gave birth to a dying baby consent to her pictures taken? Isn't she already victim enough already to warrant the parading of her pain, her body, and what ought to have been her sacred, private moment? What about her child, had it survived? Would the grown child have pointed out his birth picture in glee to his friends? What about the other children of this woman, born and unborn? Hands up anybody who wants graphic pictures of their mother, sister, daughter, loved one making the rounds in the hands of the media? Sensitisation about the grim nature of the Zambia Health Care situation could have been done very effectively without turning a wider public into voyeurs of one woman's "private" moment of misery.

"It's like getting raped every day"

While the case above has been subjected to the rigours of "regulation" (the *Post News* Editor was, on July 13th, 2009 arrested and charged with circulating obscene material – which some have pointed out is but a political ploy) there are too many cases for comfort that do not receive the requisite sanctioning. A number of these have tended to emanate from or go the route of "citizen media" where the regulatory framework is fuzzy at best. Two cases warrant the attention of anybody interested in the media/gender justice nexus, for the otherwise terrible precedent they set, but also for the lessons that can be drawn from them with respect to the use of the Media as a new form of Gender violence. These are the cases of Elizabeth Wong and Evelyn Ankumah, two accomplished women and indefatigable workers for human rights, based in Malaysia and Ghana respectively. The similarities these cases demonstrate across Asia and Africa are uncanny and unsettling.

Wong, 39, was, until her "Naked Pictures Scandal," a respected politician, an Assemblywoman and Executive Councilor in charge of Tourism, Consumer

Affairs, and the Environment in Malaysia's Selangor State, a state marked for being the most prosperous and developed in the country. She was the first politician to win the State Assembly seat for her party, the People's Justice Party (Parti KeADILan Rakyat - PKR), and with a huge margin of 5000, reportedly the second largest majority won by a PKR candidate. Wong brought a convincingly solid pedigree to the position: involved with human rights issues since her student days, she was one-time Secretary General of the National Human Rights Society and Fellow of the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs (2002-03), and founding member of the Solidarity Campaign for Human Rights in Aceh, amongst other achievements.

An unmarried woman, Wong is reported to have had naked pictures of her taken by her boyfriend, using a mobile phone, who then circulated them on YouTube. The pictures were to make a continuous loop across various websites, and the story was splashed across especially the tabloids in Malaysia. In spite of making clear the pictures were taken without her consent, and were being circulated by a malicious ex-boyfriend; in spite of reporting the matter to the police, the "court of Public Opinion" was to eventually force Wong to resign her position. Two months after tendering her resignation, however, the Selangor government recalled Wong. In May 2009, shortly after being recalled, a new spate of photographs was posted online, some showing Wong asleep (suggesting, therefore, that she was unaware the pictures were being taken). The price of this invasion of privacy has been rather tall, with Wong expressing that it's like "getting raped everyday." Still the pictures make the rounds unabated. Where is the ethics and justice in all this?

Media persecution deleting gender gains

Ghanaian-born Dutch citizen, Evelyn Ankumah is also currently living the nightmare of "media rape." The Executive Director of Africa Legal Aid (AFLA), a Pan-African Organisation with a big justice footprint that is dedicated to the promotion and protection of individual and collective human rights across Africa



Is sensational tabloid media eroding gender gains?

Photo: Brendan Kennedy

“and to challenging the impunity of gross human rights violators” is faced with the reality that the media can be an indiscriminating vehicle for such human rights violations. In various articles and statements authored and said by Anas Amareyaw Anas, a journalist who has published with *The New Crusading Guide of Ghana*, Ankumah has been implicated in what has been dubbed a “Diplomatic Sex Scandal.”

This widely published human rights lawyer, who has worked on human rights issues extensively in America, Europe, and Africa – and continues to do meticulous work with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, scoring very highly in matters of gender justice and working against the violation of women’s bodies - is being accused in the media of running a brothel specialising in

servicing Ghana’s diplomatic corps. The evidence? A videotape that is said to have been disqualified as a fabrication by an imminent media production house. Ankumah has since filed for libel. She also submitted a complaint to MultiChoice Africa against Anas’s nomination for the CNN African Journalists Awards for 2009.

These actions have not stopped the government of Ghana from repealing the agreement that gave AFLA the right to practice in Ghana (thus extending crucial services to Africa, and Ghanaian citizens in particular, even as it was substantially funded by the Dutch government). Neither did it stop CNN’s “recognition” of Anas as being among the journalists of Africa who are telling “good” stories on the continent. Ankumah’s struggle to reclaim the right of AFLA

to work in Ghana, and against her “tarnished” image, has been taxing on her seven year old daughters – who have had to be moved from their school – and is likely to prove costly to the valuable Human Rights and Gender Justice work that Africa requires acutely.

The sophisticated new means of violating women, passing for media work, are just that: tools of violence. The perpetrators need to be dealt with as fit, and networks need to rise to the support of the victims. The challenge posed to Ethics, Human rights, and Gender work is clear: our strategies need to metamorphose with the increasingly morphing nature of gender violence, lest all victories scored to date be wiped off as easily as pressing the delete button on any erstwhile computer.

● Writers Bio

Dr Pinkie Mkgwe, a Gender Links Board Member, is an internationally recognised scholar having contributed, in the last 13 years, to English and African literature, gender politics and education in numerous refereed publications. As a post-doctoral fellow at the Wits Institute for Economic and Social Research (WISER), Dr. Mkgwe contributed to the Sexuality and Masculinity discourse within WISER with several articles and numerous presentations leading to the preparation of a book manuscript on Sexuality and the Concept of the Nation. She has also been an assistant lecturer at Sussex University's School of African and Asian Studies, and a visiting lecturer at Malmo University in Sweden. Within the media, Dr Mkgwe was, for 3 years, a producer and presenter of “Open Book”, an educational, literature-focused radio programme aired on a Gaborone-based radio station. The weekly programme interviewed known people in different fields on their book interests, aiming at encouraging listeners to invest in reading. She was a founding Board Member of the Botswana Media Regulatory Body, and its first female chairperson. Dr Mkgwe holds a BA from the University of Botswana; as well as an M.Sc and D.Phil. (Gender and Literary Studies) from the University of Sussex.