



Radio, Convergence and Development in Africa: Gender as a Cross-Cutting Issue¹

By Mary Myers, PhD

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to argue for the consideration of gender issues in all research on radio, convergence and development in Africa. It was written to guide the deliberations at a Roundtable Discussion in September 2009 on a research agenda for community radio, to ensure that gender considerations are front and centre to those research plans. However, the context and recommendations discussed are relevant to diverse research related to radio in Africa. By considering gender in research agendas, there are great possibilities for radio to incorporate strategies that will benefit the population as a whole.

Key words

community radio, media monitoring, gender research, convergence, ICTs

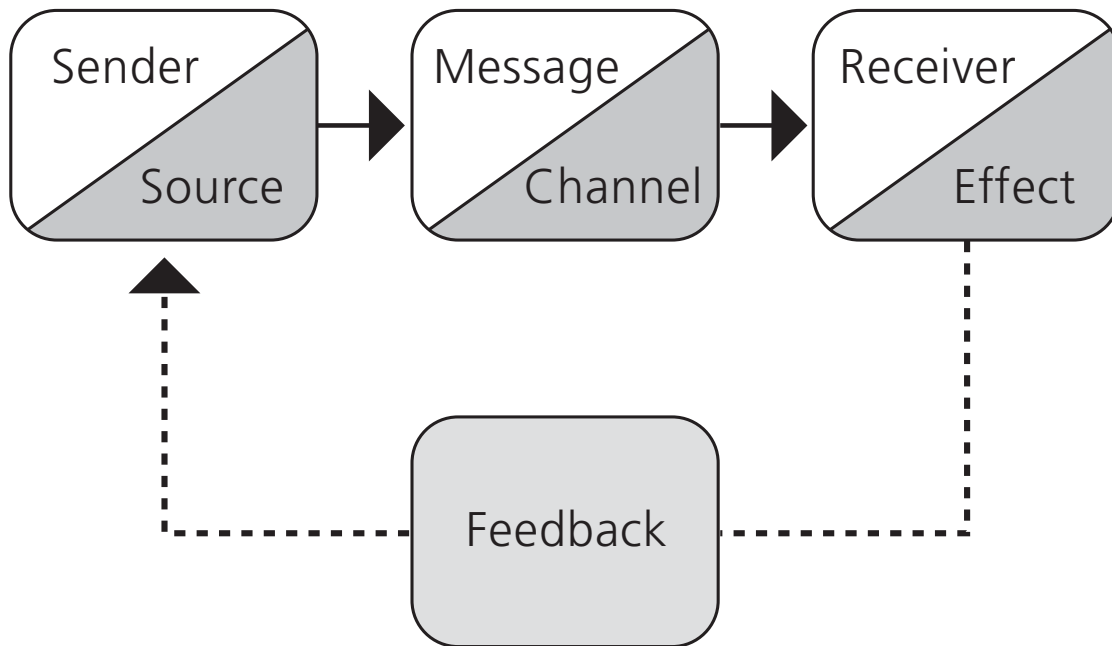
Why consider gender in research?

Without considering gender issues, research conducted related to community radio may in fact further marginalise individuals and groups. The area of radio and its convergence with other types of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is under-researched (Myers 2009), and thus new research in this area should be cognizant and responsive to gendered aspects of the research theory and design applied to the projects.

Gender issues arise where the prevailing social, cultural and economic circumstances disadvantage one sex – usually women in relation to men. In the

present context of media and development, gender issues arise and affect all parts of the communication equation. Let us use the basic linear model of communication, where we have three main elements: the media producers (or message senders), the media content (or message) and the media audience (or receivers) (Shannon and Weaver 1949).²

Media are always created and consumed in a social and cultural context; they are never context-neutral. Thus, media makers (e.g. broadcasters, journalists, editors, owners, technicians, advertisers, etc.) are all



subject to the prevailing social, economic and cultural norms of their personal milieu, and their views, outlook and output will reflect those norms. Likewise, the media audience will also be subject to their own social, economic and cultural norms, which affects the way they access, consume and interpret media content (Hall 1980).

So, for example, a DJ presenting a youth radio show in, say, urban Canada will have a very different background, outlook and style from a presenter on a youth programme on a rural radio station in, say, Afghanistan. The content of those two youth shows will reflect those cultural differences. Likewise, the audiences of those two shows will have very different life expectations and experiences and will expect the radio programmes they listen to reflect those. It is not hard to imagine how these two notional presenters are likely to talk in very different ways about women and girls on their radio programmes. For example, a Canadian youth – show covering the issue of marriage will differ markedly from a show about the same issue in Afghanistan.

Thus, we see how gender issues arise and vary

across different media and different audiences. Our two notional presenters will reflect their own cultural norms of the way women and girls are expected to behave in their own societies, in the ways they talk to and about, and feature the two sexes, and in the ways they select and present content in general. Gender issues arise in all stages and aspects of media practice, production and consumption – that is why we are referring to them here as cross – cutting.

Gender issues and media producers

When looking at media producers, the most striking gender issue is that men dominate the industry. This is true all over the world, especially in Africa, where women's access to education, and consequently the professions, is generally lower than in developed countries.³ The 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) showed that the only area of the media in which women are found in roughly equal proportions to men is as TV presenters. Women are under – represented in all other areas, and especially in the print media. Women journalists are often assigned the 'soft' beats such as fashion and life style, rather than the political or economic



Claiming new spaces: DJ Che Ulena at Katutura Community Radio

Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

beats, (GMMP 2005 quoted in Lowe Morna et al 2006).

A study by Gender Links of gender parity within 126 media houses in Southern Africa (excluding South Africa), found that women fill only about a third of media posts. There are particular shortfalls when it comes to women in top decision – making positions. The study found that women throughout Southern Africa (South Africa included), constitute about 30% or less in the top four echelons of the media industry – 28% of those on boards of directors; 23% of top management; 28% of senior management and 31% of professionally qualified (Lowe Morna and Made 2009).

Apart from journalists and editors, other roles within media production, such as technicians, sound engineers, camera– operators, editors, advertisers, web – masters etc. are invariably male preserves due to cultural and educational reasons, and the fact that

newsrooms' prevailing work practices are often not family – friendly. Thus, we find that women have limited access to decision – making within the media realm for a host of reasons. Lowe Morna and Made (2009) say these

...boil down to social stereotypes defining women's space as being in the private rather than public sphere. Politics and the media are among the most public of public spaces and therefore the most hostile for women to access.

(Lowe Morna and Made, 2009)

Women media professionals are much more likely to reflect other women's needs and perspectives than their male colleagues are. Furthermore, women's voices on radio and women presenters and newsreaders on television are much more likely to present positive role models for women and girls, generally, and to attract a female audience. Of course, it is not impossible for men to cover gender issues, and not all women journalists or women producers or managers will necessarily be gender – aware or will have a natural inclination to cover women's issues themselves. But it is still easier for a female journalist to gain the confidence of women interviewees, and easier for a female producer to do a good in – depth report about all sorts of topics than it is for men.

“One of the greatest challenges facing journalists, both men and women, is to resist the culture of casual stereotype in our everyday work. That is no easy task when media are full of images and cliché about women and girls. Many are relatively harmless, but some, often the most powerful, portray women as objects of male attention - the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard-faced corporate and political climber.”

– Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary

Apart from a lack of women journalists available to cover women's stories and issues, there are other practical constraints to gender sensitive coverage by media houses. These include a general lack of resources such as budgets for transport and communications, which means that making an extra effort to seek out female interviewees – such as travelling to rural areas to interview poor village women – is often not possible because of lack of time, money and transport. As one female journalist

from Dimtsi Haffash, Eritrea's state broadcaster, told the author:

'I don't get out into the field very often... Maybe twice a year. Not more than that... It is a great problem because most of my listeners are outside Asmara, and I want to collect voices of mothers talking about their children... [But] I need permission first of all, then transport and materials, everything.. If we had our own vehicles I could go out for one night and come back, but I have to go by bus to Keren [a day's journey], but even there this is not by target audience, so I need further transportation to take me to the rural areas.'

(quoted in Myers 2004, 188)

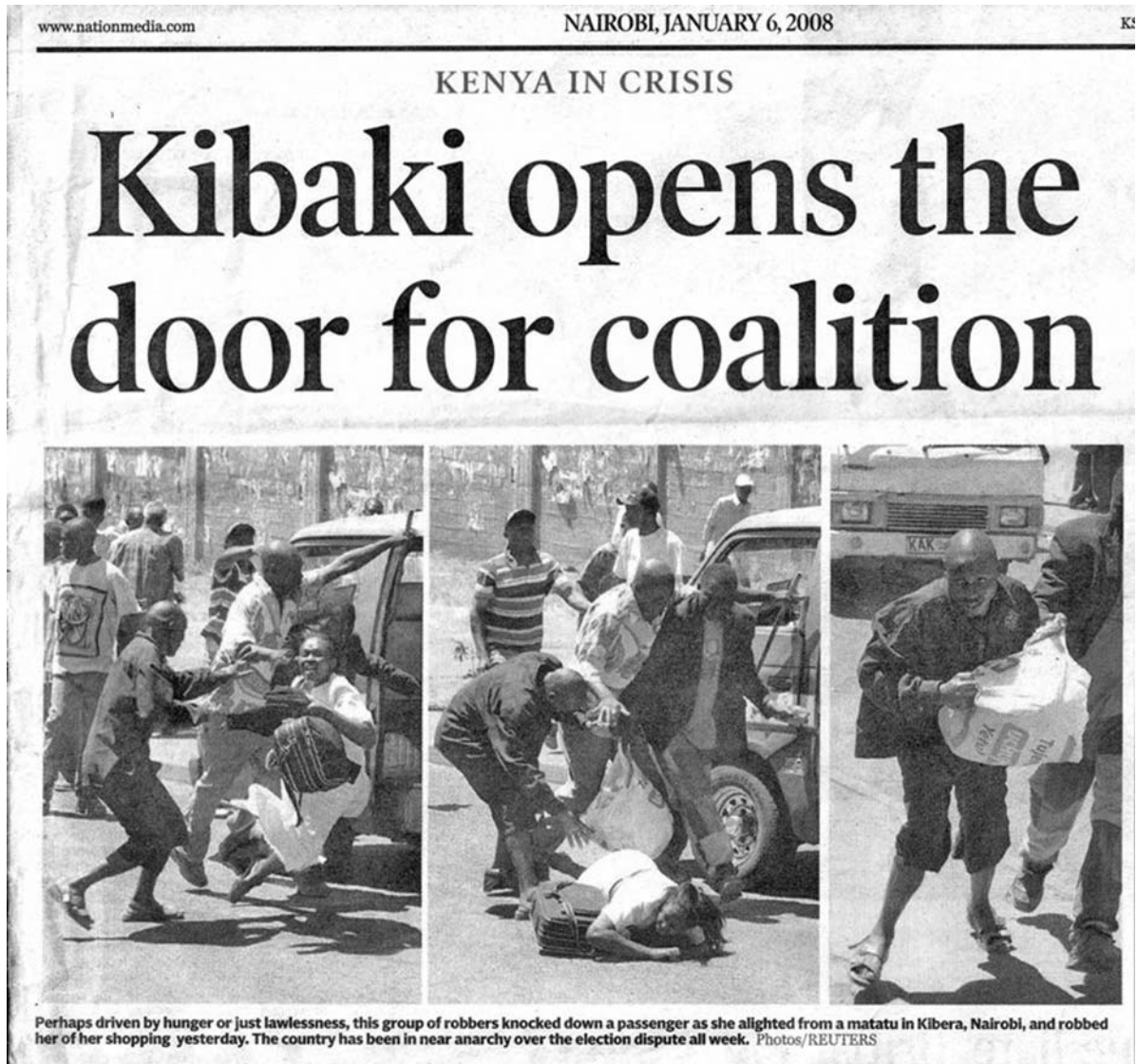
The current changes in media production and distribution in Africa and the increasing fragmentation of the media market are other important factors affecting producers' ability to cover gender issues. With increasing commercialisation and the rise in numbers of small private radio stations, we are seeing an erosion of the public service function, which large state broadcasters formerly fulfilled.

Gender issues in media content

Among the findings of the GMMP, are that women are more than twice as likely to be portrayed as victims than men in news stories - 86% of all 'spokespeople' in the news are men, while women are featured as 'experts' only 17% of the time. Women make up more than half of the world's population, but feature in only 21% of the world's news headlines and women are far more likely than men to be identified according to their family status. Although women often feature as victims of war,

natural catastrophes, accidents, etc., there seems to be an exception when it comes to sexual violence. Again, the GMMP showed that domestic and sexual violence are under-reported in the mass media, generally, and are the least-reported subjects among those where women are portrayed as a victim (quoted in IFJ, 2009).

In terms of radio content, the classic 'women's subjects' in Africa are those relating to the family and the domestic sphere. For example, in one of the author's studies about Eritrea (Myers 2004), the only



Women often depicted as victims

radio programme directed at women in that country is a 15– minute programme called ‘Mother and Child.’ This in spite of the fact that Eritrea had a long history of women’s involvement in the country’s liberation war, with 30% of its fighting force (the EPLF) made up of women, and, at one time, Eritrea had some of the most progressive policies for the advancement of women on the African continent.

Other issues of prime importance to African women in their productive roles – especially as food producers – are also often neglected. The International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) conducted quantitative and qualitative research in 2008 on how the media cover agriculture, rural development and women in three countries: Mali, Uganda and Zambia. The results of the study (IWMF 2009), revealed ‘a profound disconnect between African media coverage and people’s lives’ when it comes to reporting on agriculture and women in agriculture. Findings show that even though agriculture plays a crucial role for Africa’s economic

growth, it comprises only 4% of media coverage. What is more, even though women produce 70% of food in sub – Saharan Africa and make up half of the region’s population, just 11% of the sources and 22% of the reporters were found to be female, and women were focal points of just 7% of the stories analysed.

The media and masculinity

Before we turn to consideration of the radio audience, a word must be said about the way the media treat men, since this is a gender issue too. So far, we have seen that there are serious biases in terms of women’s portrayal in the global and African media. However, men are subject to stereotypes too. For instance, men are typically characterised as forceful, virile, emotionless, physically and economically dominant, in contrast to women, who are generally portrayed as weak, emotional, dependent and victimised. This construction of masculinity leaves little room for alternative visions of what “being a man” means. It



Women’s role in agricultural labour often overlooked

Photo: Trevor Davies

tends to deride and discourage homosexuality, for instance. It also tends to demean men in caring or domestic roles, vulnerable men, men who oppose violence, and any man who, in some way or other, may fall outside the dominant norms of masculinity.

Both the global and the local media, especially through action– movies, advertising and music, help construct and sustain men and boys' views of themselves (Busby 1985; Fejes 1992; Gunter 1986). Various studies have investigated and established links between media narratives and actual anti– social, violent and harmful events and trends. For instance, gang membership in South Africa has been associated with media narratives, which continuously link violence with masculinity and 'real men', in the eyes of male youth in economically– deprived townships (Sauls 2005).

On the positive side, the media can be, and sometimes are, used constructively to portray role models for young men, showing men who speak up for non– violence, self– control, resistance and respect for women. For example, in the Soul City radio and TV series in South Africa (Barker & Ricardo 2005). Therefore, in our examination of gender issues in radio in Africa, we must remember that they are not just about uni– directional inequalities in the form of powerful men against vulnerable women, but that there are important power relations that need addressing in relation to men and boys as well.

Gender issues and the African radio audience

Because of women's marginalised status in most societies, the presence of community media that prioritises women's concerns can make a positive difference to women's status and welfare within the community. For example, in Kenya, where community radio station started operating in 2004, rural women's problems with water provision have been addressed. This came about because the radio station publicised the fact that some local politicians were closing community boreholes in the area so that they could sell water to the village women from their own boreholes. Young women working at the radio station took up this issue:

'When one of them did this... after the radio went on air, we covered it on the radio, explained what he had done, and what it meant to us – and that he had no right to do what he did. He got furious... [but]... when he cooled down he realised that he had no case... And we are sure that such things won't happen again. And if they do, we are there!!!,'
(quoted in Jallof 2007, 62).

In addition to addressing women's practical gender needs such as clean water, community radio can shine a light on more strategic issues such as domestic and sexual violence within communities. For example, in Western Uganda, where the Kagadi – Kibaale Community Radio operates, abused children and women give testimonies about domestic violence, rape and incest on the radio. The administration follows up with the manager of the programme, and later with the local authorities, to seek redress. According to Mwalimu Musheshe, the radio's manager, there has been a reported 60% reduction in domestic and gender– based violence because of programmes aired on the radio (Musheshe 2007).

Because of such initiatives, particularly where women run community radio stations for women, there are reportedly important positive changes in the way women and girls see themselves and their own potential. However, positive stories are often the exception because women generally have problems accessing radio across the whole of sub – Saharan Africa, a problem which is particularly acute among the poor and rural dwellers.

Several factors negatively affect rural women listeners, namely men's ownership and control of radio sets, women's lower levels of education (and lack of knowledge of languages other than their mother tongue), and women's higher and more constant domestic workload, which leaves them little time to devote to radio listening. Added to this, and depending on region and local culture, women are often not allowed to join men as they gather to listen to radio outside the household (Gurumurthy 2004).

Analysing the circumstances under which women in Africa listen to the radio is important for an understanding of the contribution radio can make to their lives. In the author's study of radio in rural Eritrea (Myers 2004), it was found that women had little time to devote to radio listening in the home and most also complained of the burden of housework and the noise and distraction of their children impeding their concentration. Their problems are illustrated by the following quotes (Myers 2004, 144–5):

'My radio's not been on for more than a month.

It's because I have so many children and my husband is out all the time...

I listen to songs but I can't remember which ones.

I just can't pay attention because first one child cries, then another and I can't concentrate.'

– (Woman respondent, Gahtelay village, Eritrea)'



Mural at Base FM in Namibio

Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

‘For us [women],
when we listen there are
a lot of worries,
and we are exhausted.
Our attention is
divided. But for men,
they come home
and their work’s over,
so they can concentrate
and grasp better
than us.’

– (Female focus group member,
Awlietseru village, Eritrea)

Furthermore, the study revealed that women regarded their own illiteracy and lack of schooling as an impediment to understanding and making the best use of radio programmes, even programmes designed for them and about developmental issues.

The study showed that many factors contributed to rural Eritrean women not retaining and understanding educational programmes on the radio. Some related to lack of access to radio and programming times clashing with women's daily schedules; however, many related to a lack of self-confidence among women listeners themselves and the monotony and difficult language used in the radio programmes. In controlled listening tests, it was found that rural women, whether schooled or not, were, in fact, able to comprehend and retain as much information from educational radio programmes as their male counterparts, as long as they were able to sit and concentrate quietly on the programmes, which they were rarely able to do in their daily lives.

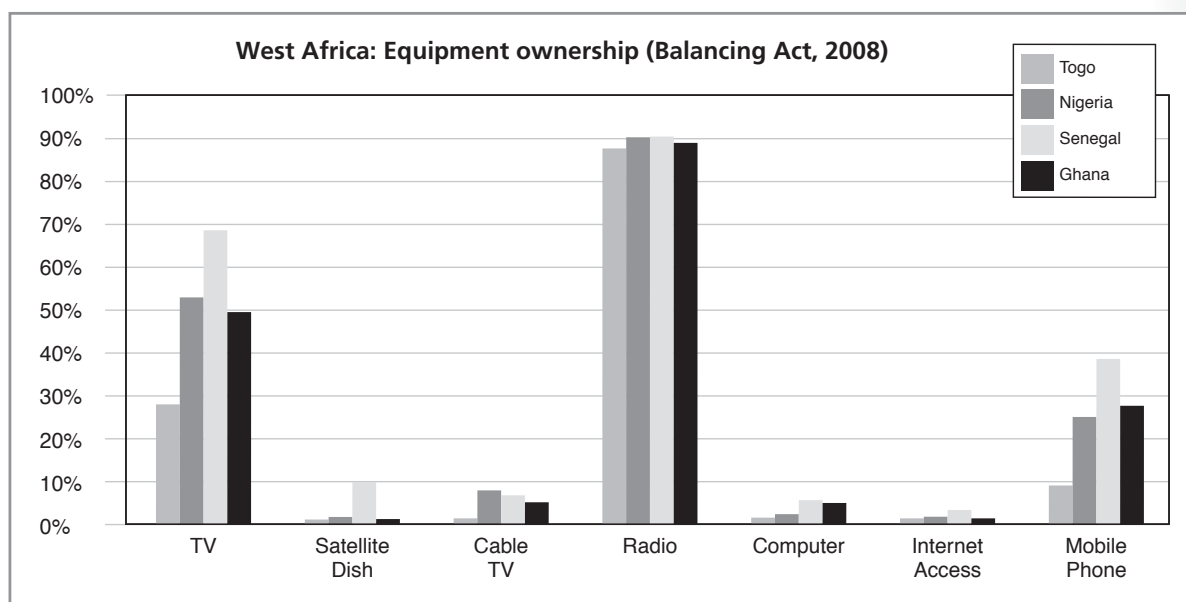
Gender and Convergence of Radio with new ICTs

The convergence of radio with different ICTs can alter the way in which radio is perceived, accessed and used. Converging with other ICTs has opened up radio stations through internet streaming, downloading and listening on mobiles and other handhelds, and the increased interaction through a range of different ICTs. However, while technology empowers, it also affects and alters gender relations. The following are some socio-cultural factors that impede women's use of ICTs, particularly in rural areas:

- Cultural attitudes discriminate against women's access to technology and technology education.
- Women are less likely to own communication assets, such as radios and mobile phones.
- Women in poor households do not have the income to use public facilities.
- Information centres may be located in places that women are not comfortable visiting.
- Women's multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities limit their leisure time, and centres may not be open at times when it is convenient for women to visit them.
- It is more problematic for women to use facilities in the evenings and return home in the dark (Gurumurthy 2004)

Added to these are problems of literacy; women account for two – thirds of the world's illiterates. Without literacy, computing presents enormous problems and even mobile phone use is limited.

The beauty of radio for the female audience is that, as an affordable, portable, oral/aural medium, it overcomes many of the barriers posed by other ICTs. The advantage of radio for female producers and managers is its relative accessibility in terms of technical specifications and its affordability in terms of initial equipment investment. But as radio and new ICTs converge, with, for example, increasing use of mobile phones for audience feedback and computer and MP3 technology for radio production, the same lessons in terms of gender-differentiated use of technologies need to be read across and



applied to radio as well. For instance, modern studios with computer editing and satellite transmission are becoming increasingly technically complex, which means women producers are often at a technical disadvantage because they have historically had less educational opportunities in science and technology, especially in Africa.

It can be exciting to contemplate the possibilities for interactivity, information provision and advocacy offered by the Internet, e-mail and mobile communications. But let it not be forgotten that radio access far outstrips computer and mobile phone access throughout the population of sub-Saharan Africa, as the graph above illustrates.

What little sex-disaggregated data we have points to much lower access to and usage of computers and Internet technology among African women as compared with men. For instance, in a UNESCO study from 2003, it was found that in Uganda and Senegal, women Internet users only constitute about 31.5% and 12% of Internet users, respectively (0.1% of the total population in both cases), while in South Africa women users constitute 19% of Internet users (0.3% of the total population). In most parts of Africa, women users are part of a small, educated urban elite (Primo, 2003).

Therefore, initiatives such as streaming radio stations on the Internet and introducing podcasting radio content to MP3s or mobile phones are likely to reach relatively few people, of whom an even smaller number will be women. It is therefore important that new ICTs do not deflect attention from radio and, where radio and new ICTs are combined, it is important that women's access is supported appropriately. For example, in South Africa, the Women'sNet community radio project is based on appropriate technology use. It includes a web-based clearing house of radio content on women's issues, whose main features are a database of searchable audio features, clips and news, links to gender resources for 'radio on the Internet', and a help section that includes information about how to get connected and where to get the right software (Primo 2003).

Gender research agendas

In contrast to the radio literature, in which we find few references on the topic of African women, there is a relatively large body of literature on gender and new information and communications technologies (ICTs) in developing countries (see, for example, Rathgeber and Adera 2000; Hafkin and Huyer 2002, 2006; Olatokun 2008; Buskens and Webb 2009). Much of this literature argues

that ICT has widened the digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world on one hand, and between males and females on the other, although, as noted by almost all authors on the subject, reliable statistics that are disaggregated by gender are hard to come by.

There are many challenges to incorporating gender issues in media research. Some are on the macro level, such as lack of resources in national statistics bureaus. Others are encountered at local levels, for example, in household surveys in which it is more difficult, expensive and time consuming to reach women respondents, so consequently they are often left out of the picture.

We can divide areas for research into three: baseline data, impact evidence and future trends. Firstly, on establishing a gendered baseline, we still do not know some basics, for instance:

- How many (or how few) women have access to working radio sets in Africa as compared to men?
- How large is the female radio audience, particularly in rural areas?

- How many women/girls have access to mobile phones, computers and the Internet, and where are they?
- How do they make use of these technologies and where are the gaps in access and provision?
- Further unknowns, in terms of baseline, include:
- The proportion of female to male journalists,
- How many female media producers and managers exist in sub-Saharan Africa, where are they and what are their needs?

Secondly, in terms of impact evidence, we also know little about the impact of content related to gender issues on audiences. Whereas there has been some research on the impact of some of the classic 'women's subjects' such as family-planning campaigns, social issue dramas and sexual and reproductive health messaging (see, for instance, Papa et al., 2000; Singhal & Rogers 1998), there has been little research about the impact of mainstream content such as news, advertising, soap operas and music on women and girls as listeners. Likewise, we know little about the effects of radio content on men and boys' concepts and ideals of masculinity.



Making sure women's voices are heard. Houda Malloum, a journalist for the radio station La Voix du Ouaddai in AbÉchÉ, interviews a woman in the Gaga refugee camp for an episode of the women's radio program, She Speaks, She Listens
Photo: Internews Network



Children broadcasting from the local radio station

Photo: Gender Links

Of general interest would be:

- Issues of women's agency and voice and how these are responding to changes in the radio landscape.
- Ways in which radio in its different incarnations is influencing perceived and actual values, culture and gender norms in different African countries and contexts.

More specifically:

- To what extent has the new trend for live phone-ins on local radio involved and influenced the female audience?
- How has the rise of local vernacular stations impacted women and girls – have they increased the relative proportion of women listeners?
- Has the rise of mobile phones enabled more women and girls to participate and interact with radio?

Thirdly, in terms of predicting and preparing for future developments in technology, regulation

and broadcasting trends, looking at future trends through a gender lens might include, for example:

- Understanding not only what the future holds for pro-poor programming, but also for pro-women programming. Is it, as some seem to predict, likely to fall off the agenda?
- As broadband expands and becomes cheaper, and Internet radio increases its reach, does this mean that both radio and the Internet will become increasingly accessible by African women?
- How women's practical and strategic gender needs might be best served by citizen journalism and social media. For instance, are these new media likely to be used by women and men to challenge gender norms?

All of the above would be interesting research topics in relation to the empowerment and advancement of women and to an understanding of gendered norms for both women and men.

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Notes

- 1 Paper submitted to International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Carleton University Roundtable Discussion on a Research Agenda, Sep 10–3, Butare, Rwanda
- 2 This basic linear model has been much debated and refined since it was first posited in the 1940s (see, for example, Srinivas Melkote, 1991 *Communication for Development in the Third World: Theory and Practice* Sage). It is used here to provide a basic structure for this paper, but it is not being endorsed, here, as in any way definitive.
- 3 The Global Media Monitoring Project was first conducted on the eve of the Beijing conference in 1995; again in 2000 and again in 2005 (the tenth anniversary of the conference). Coordinated by the World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC), the GMMP is a voluntary one day of monitoring by gender and media activists around the globe that measures the extent to which media reflects the voices of women; topics covered and who speaks; extent that gender equality as a topic is covered; and the gender breakdown of reporters, presenters and those who produce the news.