

Media and Information Literacy and Women, the Case of Sub-Saharan Africa

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In the past couple of years the concepts of information literacy and gender have taken a centre stage in interrogating how intelligent and effective are consumers of information, especially women, able to critically analyse the information they access, particularly that got in the media and other institutions involved in information generation.

Similarly, as democratic space widens in many countries, the media has emerged as one of the key drivers of this democratisation processes; a platform where the citizens freely express their views on various issues ranging from political, economic, and social issues. But the question has been, who is benefiting from this expanded democracy enjoyed by the media in particular and the society in general. The most recent findings of the Global Media Monitoring Programme 2010 show **only 21 %** of those who interviewed or whose views appeared in the media were women.

Failure by women to utilize the media is caused by many factors, the major one being lack of information literacy: the ability to locate and use effectively the information in the media. Only handful of them are information and media literate. So what is information literacy and media literacy?

American Library Association defines information literacy or an information literate person as a person able to recognise information when it is needed, and has the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.

Jane Tallim from the USA defines media literacy as the ability to sift through and analyze the messages that inform, entertain and sell to us every day. It's the ability to bring critical thinking skills to bear on all media. It's about asking pertinent questions about what's there, and noticing what's not there.

Majority of the women rarely do this. It is also emerging that the negative portrayal of women in the media has left them feeling alienated and unwilling to interact the media and ask some of these questions.

Acknowledging that Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is critical in a democracy and helping people make sound economic, social, and political decisions, this paper interrogates the following issues from a gender perspective;

- The potential of MIL to enhance women's development, empowerment and economic success
- The role of MIL in women's participation and survival in an increasing changing world.
- MIL and its impact on changing women portrayal in the media.
- Recommendations on how MIL can enhance gender equality within the continent

Background

" Most educators today understand that with the revolutionary changes in communication that have occurred in the last half a century, media literacy has become as essential a skill as the ability to read the printed word" – Marjorie Heins and Christina Cho, in *Media Literacy: An Alternative to Censorship*.

The words by Marjorie Heins and Christina Cho underscore the role of the media as a special watchdog in developing democracies in Africa and other parts of the world. This means that the independence of the media—freedom of speech and freedom of information is sacrosanct.

Looking back to 20 years ago when the media industry adopted the '*Windhoek Declaration on press freedom*,' the very nature of press freedom and Freedom of Information has remained excluded from the constitutions of many African countries even though few countries have passed laws on the right to information.

When the declaration was adopted in 1991, it focused only on the press. How effective the users of this information could benefit from the information was not addressed. Until recently, majority of the people in developing countries have been grappling with the concept of information literacy in general and media literacy in particular.

There are valid arguments that the Windhoek Declaration needs to be engendered so that issues of information literacy among women and how to respond to the problem of information illiteracy are addressed in the declaration.

In relation to ICTs, the new technology has also revolutionised the way news is gathered, packaged and published. But these opportunities have not been seized by or benefited the women. Many of them have been hampered by the problem of low information literacy, connectivity, and access.

This high information literacy has made it difficult for women to question how media covers them and their issues, and by so doing they can help in deconstructing the way news are covered and produced. Compounding the situation is that many media houses in the region do not have gender policies to guide their editorial practice. This is with the exception of Southern Africa, where Gender Links has managed to develop gender policies in number of media houses in the countries within the sub-region.

But the issue before us here today is not the argument of whether or not freedom of information can empower society but also whether media and information literacy can enhance women's participation in what is called information superhighway. I am going to speak to these issues in the following sections.

The potential of MIL to bridge the digital and gender divide to enhance women's development, empowerment and economic success

Dr Musimbi Kanyaro, the current head of Global Fund for Women once said; "Information for what and for whom? Why are we collecting this information and what difference is it making in the lives of women? What do we do with the information once it is collected?"

Her argument is that unless the information collected is used for social and economic change to make the lives of women, better, we would have failed. But how do we make women effective users of the information transmitted by media and other institutions? This can only happen by empowering them to be information and media literate.

With information literacy, women can understand opportunities in the market, where to get jobs, and where to invest whatever little resources they have. They can share best practices on lessons learnt. But women can only do these issues if the following barriers are addressed; illiteracy, language, time, cost, facilities, gender roles, among others.

How the media can help in bridging the information and the digital divide

The information age has witnessed the breaking up of society into cultural groups (demassification). The media has responded to information age by concentrating, that is monopolizing in order to manage competition. There's an agreement that power is no longer wielded through the barrel of the gun but by those who control information.

The media has realized the potential of new technology especially the Internet. For example, most media organizations now have on-line editions, which they have used to tap in the global market.

But the media has also been fearful of consumers using the same technologies to question it. This is what one of the leading and respected journalists in the USA, Bob Mayor describes as the plantation's mentality: how the plantations owners feared the freedom of information to their workers more than anything else. This can be used to illustrate the power of the media and information and how leaders in Africa have curtailed the freedom of the media because they fear a literate populace who can use information to question certain things and issues.

And the media more has been accomplice. Mayor's claim that the big media is slowly becoming irrelevant on issues that affect the ordinary people can be said to be true to the majority of women. He posed the following questions; "So if we need to know what is happening and the Big Media won't tell us; if we need to know why it matters, and the Big Media won't tell us; if we need to know what to do about it and the Big Media won't tell us ... we have to tell the story ourselves."

One of the biggest problems is that the media in Africa has not put in place policies and mechanism to address the serious information gaps that exist in the society. The huge number of men views in the media, that have left the media to be labeled male dominated, are as result for this failures.

Many of the media houses across the continent lack gender policies that would among other things address issues of women participation in the information society. A gender policy would ensure that women views are sort by the media, women are educated on how to the media, and women take advantage of the information technologies to air their views to the policy makers. In so doing women would be able to influence decision made by the government and other actors of matters touching their wellbeing.

Using the gender policies, media is able to appreciate the diversity of its newsmakers and to take steps that ensure they participate effectively in the production of the news and in the national discourse.

For media to bridge the information illiteracy among women, it has to restore its original feisty, robust, fearless mission, offering journalism you can afford and can trust, public affairs of which you are a part, and a wide range of civic and cultural discourse that leaves no one out. We've got to get alternative content out there to the women who have been relying on the wrong information for many years with an aim bridging the digital divide.

For us gender advocates who believe in the right to information for women is so critical to survival of women, the concept of a "fifth estate" is valid and relevant. Using the "fifth estate" paradigm, one can argue that the coverage of any issues must be "**consistent with freedom of expression**," by doing the following;

- Giving equal voice and air-time to everyone irrespective whether they are women, men, leaders and children
- By media bringing out multiple roles of women and men in society, which is intrinsic to freedom of speech and expression. We argue that the media cannot claim to be a mirror of society when it gives skewed attention to only one gender.

MIL and it's important for women's participation and survival

The former Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohammed once said; "there is no country that is rich which is information poor and there is no country that is information poor which is rich."

The accessibility of information through affordable technology empowers people's ability to be economically viable, hence enhancing the economic growth for countries in Africa.

This is clearly captured in MIL curriculum developed by UNESCO which defines the essential competencies and skills that are need to equip citizens in the 21st century to engage with media and information systems effectively and to develop critical thinking and life-long learning skills to socialize and become active citizens.

And in East Africa, the Acacia project which was funded by the IDRC presents a model that is a clear example on how MIL is important for women's participation and survival. It says MIL helps women to circumvent marginalisation and exploitation. These two documents eloquently show the relevance and power of MIL in the emancipation of women.

MIL and women portrayal in terms of images and perceptions and how this in the end impact on women's media and information literacy

The media-the tenth critical area of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action- is one of the most important yet challenging areas of work for advancing gender equality and women's political participation.

As "formal" or legislated discrimination against women falls away, the key challenge confronting us is how to change mindsets hardened by centuries of socialization and cemented by custom, culture and religion.

Potentially having a huge role to play in this "liberation of the mind", the media has more often than not been part of the problem rather than of the solution. Across the globe, women are both under-represented in and portrayed in a narrow range of roles in the mainstream media: most often either as victims of violence or as sex objects.

Women are represented only as objects of beauty or victims of violence? Eighty percent of the food in Africa is grown and produced by women, but these stories never get into the pages of the media. When last did you hear a woman farmer being interviewed on agricultural prices?

Do the media simply reflect society, with all its imperfections, or does it also set agendas? If our reporting is guided by a human rights ethos, if we agree that the media has a role to play in challenging gender disparity, surely we must also agree that it has a role to play in challenging sexism?

The sexism and negative portrayal of women has resulted in a serious disconnect between the media and women, who consider the news in media as unfair to them or not covering their issues at all. The media has continued to do this with impunity because it knows with low media literacy; the women will not question it.

What media needs to do to turnaround the situation is do the right things: run their newsrooms in a gender sensitive manner. What does this mean in practice? It means when journalists ask about political manifestos, they need to ask to what extent these reflect concerns like gender violence, teenage pregnancies, the high rate of unemployment and lower economic status of women. Indeed, it means asking why, in our present set up, women vote for men rather than women.

This is not only gender mainstreaming, it is also good editorial and business policy. What we need to see as news is that women comprise a mere 18 percent of all parliamentarians in East and Southern Africa, yet constitute 52 percent of our population. These are issues media need to cover on consistent basis.

Approaches

There have been several different approaches to the issue of gender and the media and increasing information literacy among women. These include:

- Empowering women journalists (the route taken by media women's associations that have been especially strong in East Africa).
- Creating alternative media for women's voices to be heard, especially with the advent of IT that reduces costs and creates multiplier effects.
- Training NGOs working on gender issues in understanding the media (AWC case)
- Media encounters between journalists and women in communities.
- Consumer protests and boycotts, especially against offensive advertising.
- Seeking to bring about gender balance in the institution of the media as well as in its editorial content.

Language

In a patriarchal society, men have more authority and access to more resources, putting them in a position to articulate their experiences, values and ideas. Male experiences are therefore validated in the media, while women are viewed as 'outsiders'.

This is particularly pronounced in the use of language in the media and particularly where the words, 'he', 'mankind' and 'The man on the street' are used to refer to all people.

Language excludes women because women do not have the same linguistic conventions. It is important for media practitioners to be made aware of the fact that language has the power to exclude and as with stereotypes to reinforce patterns of power in society.

Images

The images chosen to accompany stories, whether in print or audio visual, play a major role, albeit unwittingly in conveying gender stereotypes. A conscious effort needs to be made not just to find appropriate images, but images that convey the role of women in our society in a more positive way.

Violence Against Women

In reporting on violence against women, the problem of stereotyping and biased reporting become particularly acute. The manner in which cases are reported helps to shape public opinion on violence against women, which in turn affects the way in which society responds to this violence.

For example stereotyping in cases involving rape and sexual violence often draws on prejudices about women and their sexuality and creates a hierarchy of what constitutes a 'good' believable victim. Language used can also obscure the nature the nature of crime. In other cases, media has been shown to seek only the views of men on matters of violence against women, in most cases managing to give the man a platform to argue and convince the society that the woman deserved it.

Women in Politics

Reporting on women in politics is another area where media stereotyping is damaging. There is also a tendency by the media to gloss over gender issues and undervalue women's issues. The media therefore need to have a gender policy on how to report women in politics.

Therefore the media can mainstream gender issues by doing the following:

- Giving equal voice and air-time to women and representing women in their multiple roles in society.
- By exercising good governance. Gender equality is integral to all the indicators of good governance- legitimacy, accountability, competence, human rights and the rule of law.
- The media has a role not just to follow-but to lead; to report not just what is, but what could be. Good journalism dictates that we should ask why only men are in power, what women think about the policies espoused by men in power; what visions and dreams they aspire to.
- Seek views of women on war, economy, service provision, politics, and all other issues that affect them.
- Break the silence on Gender-based violence by reporting what for a long time has been considered a private matter.
- Gender aware reporting will challenge journalists and editors to go beyond the all too common event-driven reporting to the issue based reporting. It will constantly ask seek the views of women on all topical issues.

Recommendations on how MIL can enhance gender equality within the continent

- Need to put in place mechanisms that ensure women have access to content selected, created and disseminated by media professionals.
- Developing gender policies to guide editorial and structural decisions within media houses.

- There is need to come up with a strategy to push for the adoption of the MIL curriculum developed by UNESCO by media houses, governments and regulatory authorities to ensure gender equality is advanced in and through the media.
- Negotiate with the media to include gender reporting in their in-house training curriculum.
- Develop a programme to continuously sensitize the media on poor coverage of women and women issues.
- Select a team of top managers, editors and journalists to work with on gender issues.

Conclusion

Having women who are media literate is critical for us to achieve their economic, social and political empowerment. If information literate, the women will be able to locate information and use it to access new businesses through the use e-business. Being information literate is critical if the women are to exploit the opportunities offered by ICT facilities. Civil society organization working on gender issues need to empower women in the use of ICT tools for advocacy, organizing, awareness building, accessing information and services. Training around MIL therefore has got huge potential in enhancing the participation of women in the information society.

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