

MEDIA REPRESENTATION: IS IT AN AVENUE FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF AFRICAN WOMEN?

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Abstract

There has been growing concerns about the fact that African media has failed to commit itself to ensuring that the gender question becomes a standard of measure for press freedom and access to information on the continent. The use of the female body as a mere decoration or as an attention-getting device diminishes women's self-esteem and ignores other aspects of women's personality, their human potential and contributions to economic empowerment for development. Women are underrepresented in political, social and economic reporting; this results in limiting the freedom of expression caused by self-censorship by a male dominated industry. It is a cause of concern on the portrayal of women in household-related roles, mostly in advertisements for household products, particularly because of the repetitiousness of the housewife image. The media does not fully recognize the dynamism that women display in the economic, cultural and social lives of their communities through their associations and informal networks channeled into creating new models of participation and leadership. This paper therefore explores the need for positive women access and use of the media for economic empowerment in Africa; it examines the challenges facing the portrayal of women in the media and makes recommendations on how increase women's representation in decision-making structures in media houses and develop structures and frameworks for gender mainstreaming based on laws and policies for sustained economic empowerment of women. This paper explores secondary data from text books, and journals to conclude that, without meaningful commitment in the form of policy changes and the provision of resources to address women conditions and involvement in the media representation; Africa cannot hope to see a breakthrough in its development and renewal. It recommends that, greater awareness and supportive environment needs to be enhanced by the media for women to be more self-reflective and have a greater awareness of their own weaknesses, challenges, strengths and opportunities. Women should be exposed to more in-depth training and development to gain not only knowledge and skills but also wisdom in order to be authentic leaders with integrity. Also, there should be is an urgent need to increase the knowledge and ability of mass media professionals to create more awareness on gender issues.

Key words: Positive media representation, women economic empowerment

Introduction

Women are the cornerstone of all responsibilities for meeting basic needs of the family, yet they lack adequate access to the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill these responsibilities. By providing girls with education, allowing women to have a voice

in family decisions, and providing them with opportunities for economic freedom, Africa can build stronger future generations. A wise woman; Anthony S.B, an American civil rights leader once asserted that, 'Africa is overflowing with women leaders; they lack only the training and means to bloom.' The assertion exposes

a gap that needs to be filled in order to advance the position of women in Africa; strengthen their skills and expand their capacities to contribute to economic development of societies. This can be achieved through positive media representation of women in political, social and economic reporting, in addition to other factors like financial accessibility. It is recognizable that, media is one of the fundamental tools for achieving gender equality and the economic empowerment of women. Recently, there has been an increase in the number of women who read newspapers, watch televisions, log onto websites and listen to radios. However it is noted that majority of women are uninterested and uninvolved in political affairs and development, the economy and other societal issues, therefore making women issues being pushed to the periphery of the media. It is worth noting that women are resentful of the exploitative use of the female body in advertising.

There is a great need for media to appreciate women's personality, their human potential and contributions to economic empowerment and development. It is a concern that, despite the positive efforts by majority of African governments and NGOs to guarantee women equal rights and protection from discrimination, media has not fully recognized the dynamism that women display in the economic, cultural and social lives of communities. This becomes an impediment to the speedy attainment of Africa's economic development due to exclusion of the skills, perspectives and dynamism of majority of the population who are women. According to a study conducted by the East Africa

Journalists Association, on enhancing gender equality in the Media, it was deduced that women do not receive equal opportunities as male journalists do in terms of training and advancement in their career. Some of the media institutions violate rights of women journalists such as presenting them as sexual objects; sexual harassment, intimidation, abuse, undervaluing or ignoring their work, successes, efforts, rights and by symbolically destroying or frustrating them. It is difficult to achieve sustainable development in an environment where a large section of the population is not involved in decision-making and leadership roles. There is thus need for media to enhance women representation by focusing on their democratic values, education and leadership roles to upgrade their participation, articulate their concerns and make their voices in economic development heard.

Background of Media Coverage in Africa

It is generally noted that the environment under which journalists work in Africa is harsh and unfriendly for both women and men. But the situation is worst for women, especially in countries that are in conflict or are emerging from conflict, countries where the political environment is unstable, where freedom of expression is almost none existent and where there are still very strong socio cultural practices that discriminate against women and girls.

In most African countries, women are under-represented in media decision-making structures including policy and regulatory institutions and ministries

responsible for ICT. Women are underrepresented on the boards and in the senior management of IT companies, policy and regulatory organizations, technical standard-setting organizations, industry and professional organizations. Many would appreciate some strides that have been made concerning how the media portray women in film, television and magazines, and that the last few years has also seen a growth in the presence and influence of women in media behind the scenes. Nevertheless, female stereotypes continue to thrive in the media we consume every day. Frankly speaking, women professionals in Africa continue to be under-represented in news coverage, and are often stereotypically portrayed when they are included. Inadequate women's coverage is not only an African phenomenon but seems to be evidenced worldwide.

The Association of Women Journalists in 2000 studied news coverage of women and women's issues in 70 countries. It reported that only 18 per cent of stories quote women, and that the number of women-related stories came to barely 10 per cent of total news coverage. In most cases, the media has portrayed women as objects of entertainment. It is appreciated that there has been an increase in the number of women who read newspapers, watch televisions, log onto websites and listen to radios in the recent past; but the programmes aired in most case does not empower women. The Kenyan media for example have not fully fulfilled their potential role for reducing poverty and contributing to the economic development

of women. It is important for the media to attempt to reach out to the rural poor by giving them programmes that promote sustainable development, poverty alleviation and means towards eradicating violence against women. The media in Kenya has an opportunity to mitigate domestic violence by giving wide publicity to the law against domestic violence enacted by the government, yet they failed they have failed to fully explore this opportunity.

Women in Development

According to the 2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, it is almost impossible to achieve economic development when some society members are excluded from development planning due to underrepresentation. Economic empowerment for any population is the cornerstone for sustainable development owing to the direct contribution to production systems. This should include participation of women by empowering them for development through positive media representation and involving them in making decisions concerning issues of agriculture, business and social services among others.

According to The African Recovery paper (1998), African women's fundamental contribution in their households, food production systems and natural economies are increasingly acknowledged within Africa and by the international community. Despite this acknowledgement, women in Africa continue to face enormous obstacles owing to the fact that the growing recognition of their contributions has not translated into significantly improved access to resources or increased decision-

making powers. In many societies, women's coverage in the media remains relatively limited. For historical and practical reasons, they are still at a disadvantage in getting the information and resources that they need to work more productively and improve family welfare (Barbara H, 1999). Even when national policies encourage equality of opportunity, women still generally lag behind men in educational attainment, earning capacity and other respects. Traditional constraints not only tend to limit the supply of opportunities for women; they also limit directly or subtly women's own demand for such opportunities. This vicious cycle depresses both productivity and welfare.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, paragraph 3.16 asserts that, women are generally the poorest of the poor and, at the same time, key actors in the development process. Thus, eliminating social, cultural, political, and economic discrimination against women is a prerequisite of eradicating poverty...ensuring quality family planning and reproductive health services, and achieving balance between population and available resources and sustainable patterns of consumption and production. The fact that women are seldom involved in decision making or policy formulation processes has impeded their socio-economic development and has led to most key issues affecting them remaining untouched. However women know that the acquisition of knowledge constitutes the first step towards the process of change, be it social, economic, cultural, or political. Information is the

catalyst, the driving force, and the product of such an evolutionary process of change. Good information flow is an integral part of social and economic development.

Media Representation of Women

Access to information is becoming increasingly important to people's everyday lives throughout the world. Women's rights around the world are an important indicator to understand global well-being. The most cursory examination of media confirms that young girls are being bombarded with images of sexuality, often dominated by stereotypical portrayals of women and girls as powerless, passive victims. Under-represented, women are equally misrepresented: the hyper-sexualization of very young girls, most notably in fashion and advertising, is a disturbing trend given that these stereotypes make up most of the representations of themselves which girls and women see in the media. The pressures on girls are exacerbated by the media's increasing tendency to portray very young girls in sexual ways.

It is worth noting that women are resentful of the exploitative use of the female body in advertising; where the use of the female body as a mere decoration or as an attention-getting device diminishes women's self-esteem and ignores other aspects of women's personality, their human potential and contributions to economic empowerment for development. Even media attention on women who help and fight for certain causes is distorted. In other cases, the roles of women presented in the media, from talk shows, to

entertainment shows as well as news reporting can often end up reinforcing the status quo and the cultural stereotypes, which influence other women to follow suit. This happens in all nations, from the wealthiest to the poorest (and happens with men as well as children).

The African media does not fully recognize the dynamism that women display in the economic, cultural and social lives of their communities through their associations and informal networks channeled into creating new models of participation and leadership. In many occasions, issues of vital concern to women worldwide which include gender-based violence, child marriages, the trafficking of women are often ignored or covered only superficially by local media. Across the globe, women journalists and media professionals work, many times under difficult circumstances, to bring light to the issues that affect all women. In Africa, poor women in informal settlements are often more disadvantaged than men in terms of representation and participation in decision making, income generation opportunities, physical and tenure security, shelter, and legal and human rights. Many of them appear marginalized, even hidden, from ongoing events in their communities because of lack of skills, literacy, status, mobility, and self-confidence.

According to Inter Press Service, "On a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, they produce up to 80 percent of basic foodstuffs. In Asia, they account for around 50 percent of food production. In Latin America, they are mainly engaged in subsistence farming,

horticulture, and poultry and raising small livestock. Yet, women often get little recognition for that. In fact, many go unpaid. It is very difficult for these women to get the financial resources required to buy equipment etc, as many societies still do not accept, or realize, that there is a change in the "traditional" roles. The African media still has a long journey in their attempt to open eyes to gender issues and give voice to women so that they can change their lives and communities for the better. But despite all these, it is important to recognize and appreciate the role being played every year by the International Women's Media Foundation, who honors brave women journalists who risk political persecution, injury and sometimes death in their efforts to expose corruption and champion human rights.

Media as a Tool for Economic Empowerment of Women

Empowerment is a process by which we appropriate resources, assets, skills, capacities, opportunities, and all the elements that favor, enrich, and strengthen our lives at the individual and collective levels. An empowered woman is able to analyze and overcome the oppression that marks her life. The concept of women empowerment can be linked to development, leadership, democracy and all components of social well-being. Empowerment leads to an increase in the spiritual, political, social, or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves developing confidence in one's capacities. There should be positive gender conceptions which legitimate

women's sense of dignity and self-respect, and their right to self-determination (Schrijvers, 1991).

Empowerment entails letting the power out to encourage people to gain the skills and knowledge that will allow them to overcome obstacles in life or work environment and ultimately, help them develop within themselves or in the society. It includes; the ability to make decisions about personal/collective circumstances; the ability to access information and resources for decision-making; ability to consider a range of options from which to choose; having positive-thinking about the ability to make change; ability to learn and access skills for improving personal/collective circumstance; ability to inform others' perceptions through exchange, education and engagement; increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma and increasing one's ability in discreet thinking to sort out right and wrong.

Women's empowerment focuses on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits. For women who can access and use them, media offers potential, especially in terms of reducing poverty, improving governance, overcoming isolation, and providing a voice. However, existing persistent gender discrimination in labour markets, in education and training opportunities, and allocation of financial resources for entrepreneurship and business development, negatively impact on

women's potential to fully utilize the media for economic, social and political empowerment.

Economic empowerment of women involves movements and transitions out of poverty, with asset building thresholds in terms of physical, human, social and ecological capital. Thus, asset accumulation is a pre-condition for economic empowerment and sustainable accumulation of assets is the key to upward mobility beyond survival and towards economic empowerment. Poverty in Africa has tended to worsen over time and is characterized by high concentration of women among the poor who do not earn enough from their work to lift themselves out of poverty (ILO, 2004).

Macaire (2011), during international women conference in Kenya stated that, girls and women need to be at the heart of everything we do if we want to eradicate poverty. For example, we know that getting girls into school begins a chain reaction of further benefits. Educated women have better maternal health, fewer and healthier children and increased economic opportunities. In Kenya, empowerment has been a gradual process for women since independence. Due to the socialization of women in Kenya's patriarchal society, most women believe it is the role of men to provide for the family and, as a result, most women are economically dependent on their spouses or parents. For the young Kenyan woman, achieving economic empowerment is a constant struggle. However, women who are economically empowered make an impact in their communities politically as well as socially (Kariuki, 2010).

Efforts made to women's empowerment and development in Kenya for example, tends much to rely on the mass media and resultantly media feel a responsibility to share its power to influence the dynamics of women's liberation. But media in its functioning in favor of women's empowerment encounter confrontations from diverse forces and for its own profit it compromises with patriarchy, political parties, religion and market. Consequently it fails to fight against the evils that cause women's subordination. The futility is reflected through media's construction of women, coverage on women's issues and in the efforts to ensure women's access to media. However, there is a constant denial of this fact by media and in doing so it presents women's sufferings that purchase external sympathy for the ruling patriarchy.

As Africa's first and only woman president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf once said, 'leadership is never given on a silver platter, one has to earn it.' Leveling the playing field by paying attention to the need for gender equality is a means to make leadership positions for women in Africa a more realist aspiration. When women, who have traditionally been denied a voice in decision-making through misrepresentation, come to power, they transform the development agenda toward the human component - focusing on health, nutrition, education, water, sanitation and better family income. They tackle long-ignored problems such as domestic violence, alcoholism and corruption.

Participation which can be seen and gained in a variety of ways has been argued to be

the most beneficial form of gender empowerment; and this can be done through representation of women in the media. Political participation, be it the ability to vote, and voice opinions, or the ability to run for office with a fair chance of being elected, plays a huge role in the empowerment of peoples. However, participation is not limited to the realm of politics. It can include participation in the household, in schools, and the ability to make choices for one. It can be said that these latter participations need to be achieved before one can move onto broader political participation. When women have the agency to do what she wants, a higher equality between men and women is established.

Hindering the Successful Representation of Women by the Media

Women face a number of challenges in their attempt to successfully participate in the media activities which hinder their positive representation. These include:

- Cultural and social attitudes; where in some parts of Africa, especially most of the rural settings; cultural and traditional stereotypes characterize women as child bearers and caregivers who are not supposed to hold decision-making positions in society. Women who step out of the traditional roles assigned to them are regarded as unwomanly, wearing the shoes of men and not eligible for marriage. This pressure to fulfill cultural expectations has influenced many women to turn down jobs that

would separate them from their families.

- Media also places a negative spotlight on women. Some media houses prefer male staff to undertake certain assignments for coverage. The largely male dominated media often focuses on mistakes made by women, eliciting public ridicule of female leaders while male leaders are treated with more respect. This makes women fearful of entering the public arena.
- Inadequate access to decision-making roles; women are excluded from the decision-making roles and provided with limited opportunities for economic freedom.
- Capacity Building: There are inadequate programmes to build capacity in African women through coaching, mentoring and interest building to develop the next generation of leadership and new ideas.
- Gender Insensitivity: Most media organizations in Africa are male lead and gender insensitive. As a result, they do not show solidarity or give substantive support to women's issues
- Long distance to working places, unfavorable and long working hours which are major obstacles to women's participation in the media.
- Intimidation by some male staff
- Inadequate relevant and technical skills due to limited opportunities offered to women for education, training and development.

The above challenges lead to the issue of underrepresentation of women in political, social and economic reporting; which limits their freedom of expression caused by self-censorship by a male dominated industry. Most media in Africa places a negative spotlight on women. The largely male dominated media often focuses on mistakes made by women, eliciting public ridicule of female leaders while male leaders are treated with more respect. This makes women fearful of entering the public arena.

Conclusion

Despite notable progress that has been made to positively represent women by exposing their potential contributions to economic development, there is a long way to go both in quantity and quality of media representation of women. Positive coverage of women issues and giving women a voice for economic empowerment is yet to be attained in Africa; as most improved media coverage on women centers around culture, health, beauty and other social issues.

Without meaningful commitment in the form of policy changes and the provision of resources to address women conditions and involvement in the media representation; Africa cannot hope to see a breakthrough in its development and renewal.

Indeed, much remains to be done to achieve gender equality in media representation in African region. Issues such as gender mainstreaming in collective negotiations, introduction of gender responsive policies in structures and programmes of the media institutions, trade unions, associations and organizations; improved access to information in and through media; the

critical role of the media in gender justice and women's human rights need to be addressed for sustainable economic involvement of women in the development agendas.

Recommendations

- Greater Awareness and Supportive Environment should be enhanced by the media for women to be more self-reflective and have a greater awareness of their own weaknesses, challenges, strengths and opportunities.
- Women should be exposed to more in-depth training and development to gain not only knowledge and skills but also wisdom in order to be authentic leaders with integrity. This offers an opportunity to create comprehensive programming for women hence these women can then become the role models and open spaces for the future generation of women through positive representation of their abilities and capabilities
- There is an urgent need to increase the knowledge and ability of mass media professionals to create more awareness on gender issues. This should include workshops ended with participants making recommendations on how to move forward in the struggle to ensure that the mass media become a tool for women's empowerment in Africa.

- In addition to improving cultural knowledge, knowledge and information on healthcare for women, particularly reproductive and sexual healthcare, should not be ignored.
- There should be some organization of mass media campaigns to create awareness and address the negative effects of globalization that impede women's development.

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