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Gender equality and communication in Africa

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Communication is a key factor in tackling Gender Inequality. It can play a crucial role in empowering people to challenge gender norms, promote gender justice and positive relationships among all genders. For gender activists and advocates the challenges are numerous and daunting as stated by one journalist who is also a gender and women's rights advocate.

"In 1999 when I had the opportunity to work with a sub regional organization in Dakar, Senegal, I had the daunting task of sensitizing and convincing my colleagues about gender issues. I remember the first time I mentioned the word 'gender' and suggested that we needed to have gender responsive policies and programmes within the organization, some of my colleagues looked at me as if I was coming from a different planet. I had very negative reactions that alluded to the fact that I was calling for a revolution. Some even told me bluntly that I was trying to propagate some foreign ideas and would therefore face resistance from members of the association. Despite several hurdles, by the time I transitioned from that organization in 2001, we had started the process of doing what is called today a gender audit of ministries and departments of gender and women's affairs of member states of the organization. Today, the organization has been transformed into a sub-regional gender centre!"

The above experience is one of numerous examples that advocates for gender equality and equity face daily in their mission including the struggle to ensure that equal participation in and access to the media become a reality in society. There are many other challenges ranging from internal resistance within institutions and organizations where gender advocates work, sidelining of gender issues within the media, lack of awareness, and lack of gender responsive policies that would ensure that gender is factored into media coverage to mention just a few.

However, despite the challenges, some progress has been made. The results of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) from 1995 to date coupled with the Media and Gender Audits in Africa have contributed significantly to the process of setting up concrete targets to advance the commitments on "women and the media" contained in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Other factors include the IFJ Seoul 2001 action plan, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa commonly known as the Maputo Protocol. Volunteers from various regional bodies have conducted advocacy work and training programmes to address gender inequality in the media in Africa.

Brief historical overview

In 1975 the First World Conference on Women was organized by the United Nations in Mexico City. It was at that meeting that the UN hatched the idea of having a Women's Decade. From then on African women including women journalists continued to play a pivotal role in national and international consultations, policy advocacy and programmes on women's rights and later on gender equality. African women have contributed significantly to subsequent world conferences such as in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), Dakar (1994) and Beijing (1995).

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), adopted unanimously by 189 Member States of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, acknowledged the media as one of twelve "critical areas of concern". The inclusion of a section on media and communication was seen by many as a historic breakthrough.

Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action addressed gender and the media focusing on universal concerns about both the content of the media in regard to women and the representation of women within the media. Key areas highlighted included:

- * the lack of gender-responsiveness of the media through persistent gender-based stereotyping;
- * the reinforcement of women's traditional roles and the absence of women's diverse lives and contributions;
- * the targeting of women as consumers;
- * the use of women to promote consumerism by media advertising;
- * the projection of negative images of women (women as inferiors) as well as degrading images of women (women as sexual commodities) through pornographic or violent media representations;
- * Women's lack of participation in decision-making within the media, as well as in media regulatory bodies.

A number of media houses and organizations had in fact already started coverage of women's rights as far back as 1975, mostly in the area of women's empowerment and development. But with the advent of Section J in the Beijing platform for action, new perspectives on women and media emerged such as portrayal, representation, participation, ownership and giving a voice to women to decide what goes into news and programmes and how much space should be allocated to those issues.

After the 1995 Beijing conference several governments and non-governmental organizations started the process of integrating gender into their policies and programmes. Quite a number of them established women's desks or gender desks, although initially a lot of them assigned those roles to women based on the misconception that gender is synonymous with women and that gender concerns were only relevant to women.

What has been done?

Gender-focussed media monitoring has contributed to increasing the gender awareness of media practitioners within the FAMEDEV network and its partners, particularly the Africa office of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and gender focused groups, media organisations and people focusing on gender issues (in West and Central Africa, mostly women and men journalists, communicators and CSO representatives) who have coordinated the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), gender audits, and gender and media advocacy programmes.

It is worth examining the different programmes and activities undertaken which have been informed to a very large extent by the GMMP and other gender and media related programmes in Africa and the world. The GMMP has enabled most actors to take actions at individual levels and working with others in partnership.

In 2002, the West African Journalists' Association (WAJA) organized its Fifth Congress in Dakar, Senegal. One of the highlights was the setting up of a commission on "Women in the Media" to produce guiding principles for a gender policy for WAJA. It also called on the unions, associations and organisations of journalists and communicators to develop training programmes to promote women in the media, to ensure women's participation in their decision-making bodies and to guarantee a balance in recruitment and promotion of men and women to all positions of responsibility based on merit.

Between 2002 and the 2005 GMMP, several programmes were undertaken such as a study on the status of women journalists in Togo, reporting NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) from a gender and rights perspective and several training programmes on women's leadership and management for journalists in West and Central Africa. Studies were also conducted in Cameroun, Congo, Republic of Central Africa and Chad looking at issues of democracy, governance and gender in the media. A regional seminar on Media and Gender Advocacy for Francophone African Countries in 2007 following the 2005 GMMP using the Gender and Media Advocacy toolkit developed by WACC.

Lobbying with and using the GMMP findings and the subsequent media and gender advocacy trainings, the IFJ Africa office in collaboration with its affiliates and FAMEDEV network carried out media and gender audits in over 25 countries in Africa. The audits were carried out in four sub regions in Africa (Western, Eastern, Central and Southern).

The 2006 audit aimed to identify and map out a framework to integrate a gender perspective in policy, planning, programme implementation and evaluation of the activities of the IFJ office in Africa as well as Media Houses, Media regulatory bodies, Media NGOs and Media training institutions. It was conducted in eight countries in West Africa namely: Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger and Sierra Leone.

The gender audit was meant to indicate the status of gender equality and equity within five key categories of the media landscape namely: Journalists unions and Associations, Media Houses, Media regulatory bodies, Media NGOs and Media training institutions.

The 2007 audit was conducted in close collaboration with the Eastern Africa Journalists Association (EAJA) with a view to map out gender manifestations and profiling within the media in the Region. The nine countries covered were Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

The EAJA study looked at issues of violations of rights of women in the media, opportunities for training, levels of education, the work environment, media coverage of gender issues, portrayal of women, and whether women are equally represented in decision making levels and in leadership positions. It did a situational analysis in media institutions, journalists' unions and associations with a view to proffering solutions to address the inequalities that exist.

In 2009, two studies were conducted in Central Africa and in Southern Africa. In collaboration with the Union of Press Unions in Central Africa (USYPAC), the audit in Central Africa was carried out in six countries, namely, Cameroun, Central Africa Republic, Congo, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Chad. It aimed at mapping the rights and working conditions of women in the media, gender equality in media houses, the status of women in the journalist unions/associations as well as how gender issues are reported in the media. The study targeted all categories of media workers such as Journalists, reporters, animators, technicians, photographers and other collaborators.

The Southern Africa audit was conducted by the Southern Africa Journalists Association (SAJA), in six countries (Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho and Botswana). Covering newsrooms and unions, the audit aimed at gathering data on the overall proportion of women and men in the media, overall proportion of women and men in the unions, leadership levels of women in the unions, conditions of service, gender portrayal in the media as well as gender policies in the unions/associations and an analysis of union/association's constitutions.

What was discovered?

The gender and media audits revealed stark realities. In some cases very similar situations emerged which can be categorised and summarised under the following headings:

- * Training and Level of Education
- * Career advancement, Conditions of work and work Environment
- * Leadership and Decision Making – “The Glass Ceiling”
- * Portrayal and Giving prominence to gender issues

The Africa GMMP 2010 regional report shows that currently there is a huge gender gap in the representation of women in both print and electronic news media in terms of their contribution as news sources as well as in reporting news. The research highlighted gender inequality and stereotypical coverage which may be addressed through appropriate legislation and regulations guiding media laws and regulatory frameworks in the region.

The challenge, therefore, is to devise appropriate legislative and media policy regulations targeting media houses to compel them to adopt appropriate laws to promote gender equality and women advancement in the news media.

The several gender and media audits and studies conducted by different stakeholders and the different GMMP findings provide substantial research and thinking on gender and media. The research is gradually informing and stimulating more thinking in the area of programme design, policy formulation, programme implementation and evaluation. Quite a number of media practitioners now see the need to use a gender lens to cover events and issues and in the day to day running of media houses. Based on the findings of research conducted in West and Central Africa, FAMEDEV and WACC have developed a resource kit in French on gender and the media for media practitioners and professionals and members of civil society who work on gender and media issues.

Significant efforts are also being made to introduce gender responsive policies in media houses, having gender desks, gender focal points and ensuring that gender is an issue that concerns both men and women journalists and cuts across all coverage of developmental issues. In terms of creating awareness among media practitioners, reporters and decision makers a lot has been done over the years. But are we able to measure the desired impact?

Another challenge is how to make policies more beneficial to women to ensure a balance between men and women in the media in terms of leadership and in terms of meaningfully addressing gender in media development programmes. A number of questions come to mind:

- * How systematic and effective are our programmes?
- * Are we getting information that will enable us achieve the desired results in terms of the roles and status of women and men in the media over a period of time?
- * What impact do our programmes have on gender relations – conditions and relations between men and women – in the news rooms, media organisations and in society as a whole?
- * How do we continually reinforce the resources and capabilities of media practitioners and media and gender institutions to make them more effective?
- * How are we addressing the challenge of exclusion of people who do not identify as “men” or “women” or even children?

African Women’s Decade 2010-2020

It is important to point out that the African Ministers of Gender and Women’s Affairs at their Extra-Ordinary Meeting in Maseru, Lesotho, in December 2008, called on the African Union (AU) to declare 2010-2020 as African Women’s Decade. They further urged the AU to undertake wide consultations to ensure that the Decade is successful. This proposal was subsequently adopted by the AU Assembly.

The Decade was launched in October 2010 in Nairobi, Kenya on the theme “Grassroots Approach to Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment”, which is intended to create opportunities for African women and others to take ownership of the Decade. Its aim is to reinvigorate and advance gender equality by accelerating implementation of Dakar, Beijing and AU Assembly Decisions on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE), through a dual top down and bottom up approach which is inclusive of grassroots participation.

The ten themes of the Decade include: Fighting Poverty and Promoting Economic Empowerment of Women and Entrepreneurship, Agriculture and Food Security, Health, Maternal Mortality and HIV&AIDS, Education, Science and Technology, Environment and Climate Change, Peace and Security and Violence against Women, Governance and Legal Protection, Finance and Gender Budgets, Women in Decision Making Positions, and Young Women Movement.

But still there are questions:

- * Are gender activists and media practitioners taking advantage of the African Women’s Decade by ensuring that gender related policies are implemented at all levels?
- * Are issues of gender equality and the media well covered in a cross cutting manner by the themes of the African Women’s Decade?
- * How do we engage and sustain a relationship with the African Union Commission and our respective governments to advance these themes and to promote gender equality in and through the media?
- * How can we use the opportunities offered by the Decade to put gender and the media on the agenda, build synergies with governments, mobilize resources and build institutions that will enhance attainment of our objectives?

In addition, media practitioners have a responsibility to find out what has been done since the launch of the Decade in October 2010, identify critical gaps and challenges, the level of resources allocated and spent, ways of addressing challenges and show case good practices towards the achievement of the AWD objectives.

The Fund for African Women is supposed to serve as a vehicle for mobilising resources for the decade activities, under the AU’s Development Pillar in its 2009-2012 Strategic Plan. To what extent has this been done? In each member state it is expected that national committees would be set up composed of all segments of the society.

These Committees will propose one good practice Project for each theme per year. In this case one Project per country will be supported per theme per year from the AU Fund; as a result 54 projects will be supported for each of the 10 years, leading to 540 projects being supported during the Decade, under the AU Fund for Women.

It will be worthwhile as journalists, media practitioners and gender advocates to keep track of progress made at national, regional and continental levels since the launch of the Decade in 2010. Linking up with the different departments that are responsible for women, gender and development, peace and security, communication and information, political, social and economic affairs at the levels of the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in the different regions will enable synergies between their programmes based on the information generated from the GMMP and other media and gender audits done over the years. We can develop sustainable partnerships with them and other CSOs and mutually reinforce human, material and financial resources of partners concerned.

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