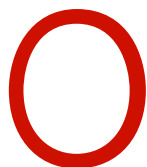


# not enough

by Hannah Pandian



**O**n a continent where many women give up access to the media because they cannot afford radio batteries, African women continue to fight prurience and sexism in the media. They are winning some battles, but more regulations are needed to help win the war, said participants at WACC's recent Cape Town conference. Shared problems and a common vision brought 32 women and men from ten Anglophone African Countries and the UK together at WACC's third gender and communication policy conference in Cape Town in June. Out of this meeting came a pledge to advocate gender and communication policy in Africa, and to use lobbying, networking, training and research to fight for an equal representation of women in the media.

An electronic network has been set up since this meeting, linking participants to one another, and to regional and

international women's networks, and other legislative and executive bodies. A pan-African study on the employability of African women journalists has also been planned.

Participants are taking the resolution passed at the conference to their governments and legislative bodies as part of a comprehensive post-conference lobbying effort.

The women and men in Cape town found that their countries shared common crises in communication: a serious dearth of gender-sensitive media policy, an appalling record of crime reportage on women, overt sexism and prurience in mainstream broadcasting and the press, a lack of access for the rural poor, and unfavourable work conditions for women journalists.

The conference had representatives from pan-African media networks like the Media Institute of Southern

Africa (MISA) and the Federation of African Media Women (FAMW), and it was possible to assess the considerable number of inroads already made into gender equity in journalism. But despite the valuable infrastructure such organisations provide, participants acknowledged that they are by no means capable of dealing with the sheer enormity of Africa's media sexism.

### **MEDIA HARASSMENT**

Worried about importing "mad cow disease" into the country, Dr Specioza Kazibwe—Uganda's Minister for Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries—banned imports of semen for the artificial insemination of Ugandan livestock. One Ugandan newspaper's coverage of this political decision closely resembled public sexual harassment. The newspaper reported that Dr Kazibwe had curbed artificial insemination as she wanted to promote the sexual enjoyment of farm animals, strongly suggesting that the female politician was preoccupied with such matters.

Unmarried women running for political office in Uganda are also hounded by journalists to produce boyfriends or fiancés for media coverage, in order to "qualify" as suitable political candidates, reported Uganda Makerere University's Gorette Nassanga.

It is, of course, not only women politicians who are shortchanged by African media. Papers presented on the situation in Namibia, Ghana, and South Africa reflected appalling practices on reporting rape and violence against women.

Margaret Bradley, from the women's group Sister Namibia, showed how two little girls raped by a man in a small Namibian village could easily be identified by their clothes and hairstyles, even though they had their faces blocked out.

Academic and journalist Audrey Gadzekpo reported on how a Ghanaian newspaper—the *Weekend Chronicle*—

### **UNMARRIED WOMEN RUNNING FOR POLITICAL OFFICE IN UGANDA ARE HOUNDED BY JOURNALISTS TO PRODUCE BOYFRIENDS OR FIANCÉS FOR MEDIA COVERAGE IN ORDER TO "QUALIFY" AS SUITABLE POLITICAL CANDIDATES**

"explained away" the rape of an 11-year old girl: the man (a teacher) had been "enticed by the soft protruding and bouncing buttocks of the 11-year old." Gadzekpo pointed out how the newspaper further stigmatised the choice to report rape, by applauding efforts by "*certain respectable people* to withdraw case from the police station for settlement at home." (Italics mine.) "With such prevailing attitudes," she concluded, "it is little wonder that official reaction to rape is still problematic."

Prurience and the often corresponding definition of "respectability" were common themes brought up in the conference papers and discussions.

### **RURAL WOMEN: UNINFORMED, UNREPRESENTED**

On the whole, empowering coverage with female role models as focal points are thin on the ground in Africa, it was found. This was in part due to "traditional" attitudes to news, i.e., only bad news like crime and "personalities" (who are largely male) are generally considered newsworthy. And the majority of Africa's women—the rural, and often poor, have neither access to the media nor see themselves in it.

Most newspapers circulated through anglophone African countries like Uganda are in English, and even local language publications often do not reach into deeply rural areas, according to Margaret Sentamu-Masagazi from the Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA). Half a dollar buys a paper, but the majority of Ugandans cannot afford that.

Even if they did, the papers would hardly be relevant to rural needs and experiences. An UMWA study conducted in 1994 found that women were the focus of only 16 percent of news coverage, and that 16 percent dwelt chiefly either on a few urban women in influential positions, e.g., the First Lady, women ministers and women managers, or on non-developmental issues like fashion shows, beauty tips, gossip and scandals.

Nassanga is trying to set up a rural women's radio project in which equipment is left with village women who are trained to record their own stories and experiences. The recordings will then be edited and broadcast on bush radio programmes, but such projects often fall by the wayside due

to a lack of funding, and often the lack of a cooperative infrastructure.

In Namibia, for example, bush radio has been a subject of discussion for years, but has not been set up as yet; insiders believe that the legacy of apartheid has separated individual communities in Namibia so that there is insufficient cooperation in getting this off the ground.

Many believe that the issue of media sexism and underrepresentation can be addressed by raising the number of women in African newsrooms and production houses.

The 1996 WACC-published report "Women's Participation in the News" found that approximately 17 percent of African news reporters were women.

Conference participants put this down to two factors, low hiring rates as well as a reluctance among some women to tolerate sexist newsroom practices.

#### **NEWSROOM INEQUALITY**

African women, it appears, often quit journalistic careers because of factors ranging from political risk to unequal workplace opportunities.

In Zambia, for example, women journalists are consistently denied opportunities to cover hard news like student riots or political demonstrations, reported the University of Zambia's Professor Francis Kasoma. Instead, female newsreaders are expected to model clothes from sponsors and are generally treated as decorative additions to serious news programmes, he said.

Often, also, there is a social stigma attached to women in

journalism because their work frequently involves travelling and spending nights away from their homes. Nassanga reported that in Uganda female journalists staying in hotels in the line of work were often classed socially with women who provide sexual services.

The general consensus at the conference was that long-term change could perhaps

**IN ZAMBIA, WOMEN JOURNALISTS ARE CONSISTENTLY DENIED OPPORTUNITIES TO COVER HARD NEWS LIKE STUDENT RIOTS OR POLITICAL DEMONSTRATIONS. INSTEAD, FEMALE NEWSREADERS ARE EXPECTED TO MODEL CLOTHES FROM SPONSORS AND ARE GENERALLY TREATED AS DECORATIVE ADDITIONS TO SERIOUS NEWS PROGRAMMES.**

only be affected by government policy and clear guidelines adopted within media organisations. Often, guidelines put together by interested organisations do get off the ground because of lack of official government support. Kenya's Interlink Rural Service (IRIS) recently produced a booklet "With Women in Mind" outlining guidelines for self-regulation when covering women in media. IRIS launched it at a press conference and is ready to work with any organisation expressing interest, but nothing has

come of it to date. "These guidelines have trouble being taken seriously because of a lack of governmental support. Our next move will be to take these guidelines "door-to-door," said IRIS' Dorothy Munyakho.

#### **POLICY GUIDELINES: ADOPTION AND PRACTICE**

A few inroads are being made into the issue of women and media policy. Audrey Gadzekpo reported, for example, that in Ghana lobby groups like the Association for Women in Media (ASWIM) and Women in Broadcasting (WIB) have been able to lobby policymakers successfully. At Ghana News Agency, for example, where in 1981 there was actually a policy not to hire women because they absented themselves from work, frequently a third of the newsroom is now female.

A news director from another media house—Ghana Radio—told Gadzekpo that ASWIM's influence over the years prompted the station to mandate that at least one story on women each day of the week would be carried on the station's air. Similarly, the Ghana Television news editor-in-chief also thought associations, especially WIB, had some impact on coverage. She said members of WIB had pushed GTV to go out of its way to cover assignments they would not ordinarily have covered—articles that presented women positively.

But despite such advances, it is generally extremely difficult to get governments to put gender-sensitive communication policies in place, reported many in Cape Town.

Kenya's Dorothy Munyakho said that the Kenyan Task

Force on Press Laws has been in place for close to five years now, but suggested that this task force acts more as a cover for the Kenyan government. When questioned about liberation of the airwaves, the government has frequently pointed out the task force has not completed its work and therefore, recommendations are still being awaited before policy can be affected.

Gender-related communication policy seems to come into existence even more slowly, said participants.

Women's groups in Zambia last year drafted a national gender policy which contains a clause on women and the media, recommending that female participation at decision-making levels is increased, and that sexist stereotypes and the negative portrayal of women be reduced. Sharon Mwalongo, president of the Zambia Media Women's Association, reported, however, that the draft policy has "since accumulated dust on the shelves of Parliament and the process of consultation is taking long. One can only assume that this is due to the reluctance of accepting (that) gender issues are important and are of national concern.

In Botswana, for example, the only media guideline on gender is the resolution passed by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) at its first meeting in Gaborone in 1993: that one third of all representatives in all MISA meetings should be women.

Botswana's delegations to all MISA conferences since that date have been predominantly women. However, ironically, this is hardly representative of the general media scene in the country and of the Botswanan chapter of MISA in particular. And despite the resolution, female representation in the board is below quota; two out of seven-person board.



African media is hardly relevant to rural needs.

In Namibia, in line with resolutions passed at the Beijing Conference, a gender policy was drawn up: Section 9 covers Information, Education and Communication. This section recognises that in the media, women are underrepresented in decision-making circles and that the media has great potential to perpetuate stereotypes and attitudes which are harmful to women. Both the National Gender Policy and Plan of Action make recommendations as to how this situation should be remedied. Suggestions include improving women's level of literacy, providing training in the use of, and access to appropriate technology, organising lectures and workshops, and the launch of multimedia

campaigns to promote gender equality.

However, an investigation carried out by Margaret Bradley from the women's group Sister Namibia showed that none of the Namibian newspapers has a written gender policy and none of the papers provided gender training from staff. At the level of daily practice, then, many of the recommendations made at a state level go unheeded.

In his opening address, Polycarp Ochilo, the president of the African Council for communication Education pointed out that for any change to take place it would need to take place under the aegis and with the blessings of national development policy. "(Media) structures tend to fall within national agenda,

national orientation and national goals," he pointed out. Recognising this, participants at Cape Town have put together a set of strategies including lobbying government.

The Media and Gender Monitor will publish regular updates of the gender and communication policy situation in all the regions where WACC conferences have started networks between media practitioners, policy-makers and activists.

Source: *Media and Gender Monitor*, No. 3 Summer 1998

WACC can be contacted at 357 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5QY, England, UK Tel (44 171) 948 2546 Fax (44 171) 735 0340