

Femme Globale: gender perspectives in the 21st Century

Women Contesting the Information Society: from Beijing to Geneva, Tunis and beyond

By L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Introduction

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PFA) set out aspirations for gender equality in 12 sectors which have guided and informed advocacy efforts by the African women's movement to realise these aspirations in the African media sector.¹ During the processes around the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the aim has been to go beyond the African media sector to the information and communications technologies (ICTs) and telecommunications sectors. For the growing convergence of media made possible by ICTs and telecommunications has impacted on both the African media as well as the information and communications work done by the African women's movement.

Unseen and unheard

Section J of the Beijing PFA addressed gender and the media. It highlighted universal concerns about both the content of the media in respect of women and the representation of women within the media. Ten years on, the coverage and representation of African women remains a concern.

African women's concerns are granted primarily 'soft' coverage in the media. The coverage of women's concerns is therefore still marginalized in daily papers and on radio and television programmes, although there is some movement away from traditional women's sections and programmes. African women still do not feature, except as aberrations or victims (for example, in the 'hard' sections of the media).

The media has also still not deconstructed the notion of the 'general public'—a notion that ignores the fact that events impact on Africa's many publics—young and old, male and female, rural and urban, etc—differently. Basic data is not adequately desegregated. And media skills and policies to ensure that women's voices, interpretations and solutions are mainstreamed, are covered as part and parcel of the daily news, economic analyses, political analyses have yet to be evolved. Women are still covered as passive, rather than as active.

The persistence of gender concerns around the content of African media is perhaps not surprising given African women's representation within the media. The figures are telling—unsurprisingly so, given the lack of clear, formal and gender-responsive internal media policies on maternity, on sexual harassment and on training and advancement. This lack continues to mitigate against women's ability to compete effectively on a level playing field with our male counterparts.²

¹ Please see reports from the Sixth African Regional Conference on Women, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 1999.

² Please see reports and proposals put forth by a coalition of Kenyan media women, led by the Association of Media Women of Kenya (AMWK) and the Interlink Rural Information Service (IRIS).

The heart of the matter

But beyond the coverage and representation of African women in the media are gender concerns that are less obvious and less easy to address. The fundamental rights to the freedoms of expression and information are recognised at the international level in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and legally protected in the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which most African governments are parties to. At the regional level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights also legally protects these rights. And in October 2002, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which monitors the African Charter, elaborated on these rights in a Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression in Africa.

Most African states constitutionally protect these rights although few elaborate what they mean in subsidiary legislation, policies and practice. Through the advocacy for increased independence and pluralism of the African media in the 1990s, much attention was paid to the ways in which these rights have been subtly hindered or expressly violated by various African states. However, little attention was paid to the gendered nature of the realisation of these rights. For the majority of African women, the exercise of the fundamental rights to the freedoms of expression and information is doubly constrained—by patriarchal law and practice (customary, religious and statutory) and by economic and political conflicts (masked as communal or 'ethnic' conflict) whose impact is without doubt gendered. The failure to understand and interpret these rights from a gendered perspective compounds the situation and also poses gender-based difficulties for female media practitioners in Africa.

Finally, although the right to communicate is not yet recognised at either the international or the regional levels, there is growing acknowledgement of the need for such recognition among development communications and media practitioners in Africa and elsewhere.³ What does communication mean to the majority of African women—those outside of urban areas, those either completely illiterate or illiterate in the colonial and/or national languages, those without any access to (let alone control over) the basic means of communication?

There has been talk around this issue in Africa ever since the independence period in the 1960s. And there have been a number of strategies put forth to address this issue, notably those that gave rise to the African rural press and national broadcasters. Today, the rural press and national broadcasters are deemed to have failed—in any case, African women did not feature in such strategies.

Public Broadcasting

There is some merit in revisiting the rural press and to decentralise national broadcasters in a manner that holds them accountable to the public (rather than to the ruling party). This is particularly so with respect to radio broadcasting.

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, broadcasting was the preserve of the state in Africa. Independent African states inherited and expanded colonial broadcast systems

³ Please see the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC)'s Communications Charter, adopted in Milan, Italy in 1999.

(including the national transmission infrastructure) and maintained a large reserve on the frequency spectrum for security purposes. As these national broadcasting and transmission systems were (and, but to a lesser extent, continue to be) funded with public money, they are public broadcasters. However, these national broadcasting and transmission systems tended to function more as state (or even ruling party) broadcasters. This situation derived from and was reflected in the Acts establishing the national broadcasters, usually placing them directly under the Ministries of Information and/or Communication.

Implicit in these arrangements was the assumption that the government of the day (and, more specifically, the ruling party of the day) represented the public—assumed to be homogenous. Thus, there were few attempts to reflect age and gender differentiation in the management of the national broadcasters, although some attempts were made, for obvious political reasons, to reflect ethnic/regional and religious differentiation.

However, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed internal movements for political pluralism, linked with internal and external demands for economic liberalisation and privatisation intended to limit the potential for state corruption and improve efficiency in production through the introduction of competition. The resulting political and economic changes impacted on broadcasting. Commercial broadcasters were established and entered the market. However, these have tended to be limited to national capitals, have high music to spoken word content ratios and broadcast primarily in non-African languages. In addition, community broadcasting—participatory broadcasting with a social development agenda—began across the continent. However, these have had difficulties with establishment, licensing and transmission, often lack a sufficient understanding of and/or training in participatory management and production processes and experience problems with sustainability.

But their impact on national broadcasters has been felt. These have experienced a decrease in public funding as African states seek to limit public expenditure and have therefore sought advertising revenues from a market in which they are forced to compete with commercial broadcasters (and, in some instances, with successful community broadcasters). Most have done so by establishing wholly commercial broadcasters which may carry similar content to commercial broadcasters, but target specific sections of the public to cross-subsidise the national broadcasters. There have also been a few attempts at decentralisation of the national broadcasters.

Therefore, on the one hand, the national broadcasters have been forced to implicitly recognise the diversity of the public. And, on the other hand, they have also been forced to implicitly acknowledge the need for public participation in public broadcasting.

That noted, the contradiction between commercialisation and the public service responsibility for the national broadcasters has not been sufficiently articulated. Sustaining the public service role of broadcasting requires political debates and decisions. But in most countries in the region, little attention has been paid to the question. Financial autonomy has not everywhere been accompanied by ownership, management and operational autonomy. Related to this is the question of ownership and management of the national broadcasters' transmitters, transmission masts and sites.

Public broadcasters need to be clearly de-linked from government under autonomous, publicly appointed and accountable bodies with clear public service mandates. These mandates, as well as the criteria and processes for public nomination and appointment,

need to be publicly debated and agreed upon. The need for and modalities of establishing public common carriers for the independent distribution of broadcasting transmissions also require public debate and resolution as a matter of urgency. In this process, due attention needs to be paid to ensuring the gender-responsiveness of content on the public broadcasters as well as of the production, management and ownership structures evolved.

The African Charter on Broadcasting⁴ and the African Commission's Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa provide clear guidelines in this respect.⁵

Community Broadcasting

But today the emphasis is also on how to build participatory communications that is two-way (enabling the expression of local perspectives, interpretations and solutions to the national, regional and international level and a constructive engagement between all levels). With such an emphasis, African women are seen not as the passive recipients of externally devised development solutions. We are instead seen as holders of information and both experiential and theoretical knowledge that the national, regional and international levels need in order to formulate policy decisions based on our own experiences, which make sense to us and which truly will make a difference to our lives.

A range of community broadcasters have thus emerged. Community broadcasters are participatory, community-based and managed broadcasters with a clearly developmental agenda. However, although community broadcasters are evolving throughout the region, but they are doing so in the absence of a regulatory framework which understands and explicitly supports them as distinct from commercial broadcasters and as complementary to the public broadcasters. Broadcast regulation in Africa ranges from being extremely flexible and open to being highly structured. Both extremes are conducive to community broadcasting. But the bulk of African states fall somewhere in between.

This regulatory vacuum (allowing for private broadcasting, but without fundamental reform of the public broadcaster and without explicit support for community broadcasting) in the remaining states is a continued cause for concern.

ICTs

The advent of ICTs has had an impact on the efforts to advance both communications initiatives of, from and for the African women's movement and gender mainstreaming within the African media.

National and regional networking to share experiences and strategies within the African women's media has become cheaper, easier and faster as a result of ICTs and thus has been intensified. Several African women's organisations and networks now make use of online alerts to inform their regional counterparts of alarming developments with respect to gender in their own states, allowing for regional intervention. ICTs are also increasingly used for collective advocacy on issues of common concern across the region. Some African women's organisations and networks also produce more regular online

⁴ The African Charter on Broadcasting was adopted during the ten-year review of the Windhoek Declaration on a Free and Pluralistic Media in Africa, convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2001.

⁵ For more information, please see Opuku-Mensah, Aida (ed) (1998) *Up in the Air: the state of broadcasting in southern Africa*. Harare: Panos Southern Africa and Wanyeki, Lynne Muthoni (ed) (2000) *Up in the Air: the state of broadcasting in eastern Africa*. Harare, Panos Southern Africa. Please also see publications by the World Radio and Television Council (WRTC) dealing with public service broadcasting.

bulletins and newsletters. These efforts have effectively provided the African media with accessible and alternative sources of content, both nationally and more importantly, regionally, thus mitigating somewhat against the situation described above.⁶

ICTs have also facilitated more consistent networking nationally and regionally among African women within the media, with some positive results. The increased availability of comparative regional information has advanced national-level advocacy work on the overall African media regulatory environment (laws and policies governing the media). Coalitions of media stakeholders (unions, development communication organisations, freedom of expression organisations and professional associations) have included key demands about representation and content around gender in many African states, basing their demands on the experiences of neighbouring or other regional states. A few media have adopted new in-house gender and sexual harassment policies. And the efforts of women within their respective media have led to interesting and useful partnerships with women's organisations in civil society to improve coverage of gender-related issues.

However, challenges exist to the replication of these initiatives across the continent. The more obvious challenges include infrastructure and regulatory concerns such as poor telecommunications connections and distribution, laws and policies that hinder universal access and the costs of both hardware and software. In addition, gender-based challenges exist. Discrimination against girls in education (particularly in the maths, science and technology), persistent gender-based division of reproductive labour and women's limited access to and control over economic and technological resources further limit women's opportunities to engage with ICTs in ways that enhance our lives. The lack of gender-responsive regulation (laws and policies) around ICTs and telecommunications even in the few African states where planning for universal access has taken place is a major hindrance to equitable access to ICTs on the continent. Here again, the need for representation by women in regulatory bodies addressing ICTs and telecommunications needs to be stressed to ensure gender is brought to bear in regulatory work. For the funding mechanisms for universal access, the design and implementation of the telecentres previously seen as a model strategy for achieving universal access need also to be gendered to be of use to African women.⁷

Conclusion

Section J of the Beijing PFA outlined two initial and overarching strategies for improving the gender-responsiveness of the media with respect to the content of the media and representation within the media. It also noted the need for free, independent and pluralistic media at the service of development and social change. And finally, it stressed the need for self-regulation by the media, with women's full participation in the development of codes of conduct and self-regulatory mechanisms. These two strategic objectives remain relevant today. However, there is need for further elaboration.

⁶ The importance of alternative sources of gender-responsive content from the region is noted in light of the previous reliance of most African media on externally-owned news agencies for information even about other African states.

⁷ For more information, please see *Engendering ICT Policy: guidelines for Action*. Johannesburg: Africa Information Society (AIS)-Gender Working Group (GWG).

Developing the infrastructure and regulation (in respect of broadcasting, ICTs and telecommunications) to reform public broadcasters and to actively support community broadcasters, paying due attention to gender, is a priority.

Ensuring the independence of public broadcasters is critical. Awareness about what community broadcasters are needs to be raised. Supportive training and sustainability mechanisms need to be evolved to assist the community broadcasters which already exist and to ensure more are established in underserved areas. And regulatory frameworks which cover the public broadcasters and also define and address the concerns of community broadcasters need to be established. Such frameworks should explicitly acknowledge and support community broadcasters (through scaled licensing fees, the reservation of a portion of the frequency spectrum for gendered rural access, cross-subsidisation from commercial broadcasters, for example).

With respect to ICTs, it must be noted that the economic benefits of the so-called Information Society derive not only from the consumption of ICTs, but from the production of ICTs. This point is particularly relevant to Africa, where advocacy efforts around ICTs have focused on ensuring access to ICTs, but not control of ICTs. Therefore, the need for investment into education, research and training for women in the fields of math, science and technology noted earlier is even more important now.

In addition, telecommunications regulation should ensure that infrastructure rollout includes practical strategies for gendered universal access⁸ (through universal access levies on private telecommunications providers, through credit schemes supporting infrastructure rollout through African women entrepreneurs and so on).

L. Muthoni Wanyeki is a political scientist who works in development communications, gender and human rights. She is the Executive Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), a pan-African membership organisation set up in 1988 and based in Nairobi, Kenya. FEMNET works towards African women's development, equality and other human rights through advocacy at the regional and international levels, training on gender analysis and mainstreaming and communications. She is also Deputy President of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC-Africa), sits on the regional advisory board of Article 19 and is a member of the Media Council of Kenya.

⁸ Universal access is a term developed by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as a standard to which all states must aspire. The term refers to the provision of a working telephone within a reasonable walking distance for all citizens. Universal access thus grounds advocacy for the provision of ICTs and telecommunications to all citizens.