

Why should gender be an issue for the media? What is 'gender and media' advocacy?

“Just as gender needs to be mainstreamed in government, it needs to be mainstreamed in the media. Now, more than ever before, there is need to strengthen the women’s J spot in the Beijing Platform of Action (BFPA): not to be looking for it!”⁹

In 1995, the United Nations convened the Fourth World Conference on Women. The document which came out of the Conference, the Beijing Platform for Action, for the first time included women and media as a critical area of concern in the form of Section J on Women and the Media.

In 2005, at the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, held to review Beijing, women media practitioners began to wonder, whether media, as a Critical Area of Concern (Section J) in the Beijing Platform of Action, had fallen through the cracks. The European Women’s Lobby document for Beijing+10 noted that “women in the media is one of the objectives that is most neglected by the European Union.”¹⁰

Critiquing and challenging the media to change the way it portrays and represents women in its editorial content and programming; the way it also confines women to the lowest positions in newsrooms; the way it uses women, sex and violence against women to attract audiences; and the way it ignores discrimination against women in all sectors of society in the main news pages and broadcasts have been core concerns of gender activists.

Gender and media advocacy includes lobbying, campaigning, research, training, media monitoring, communication and alliance-building activities which seek to advance women’s rights and gender equality in and through the media.

Its roots are firmly grounded within the women’s movement, but the forms that gender and media advocacy may take are grounded in and connected to local struggles [*note the example of MISA in Southern Africa in Chapter Two, where gender and media advocacy is intimately linked to the struggle for a free and independent media in the region*], and take direction from those who are experiencing injustices and inequalities, within our communities [*women within the media, for example, have been the catalysts of advocacy to change how women are systematically marginalized within the media*].¹¹

Box Four: Gender and Media Advocacy – Issues of conflict or opportunity?

There are two angles to gender and media advocacy

1. Media as target audience: Planned and consistent advocacy for gender equality in the media’s workplace policies and conditions of service, as well as in editorial and advertising content.

9 Maria Suarez Toro, *Looking for the J Spot*, in GEM News@B+10, March 10, 2005 ¹⁰ Ibid "An Advocacy Guide for Feminists, Young Women and Leadership, No. 1, December 2003, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

16

2. Media as partner and tool for getting across messages on gender equality: The strategic use of the media as a tool for advancing gender equality in all sectors, especially public policy, and to bring gender justice to the public's attention.

At first glance, it may seem as if two different gender and media advocacy strategies are called for to address these two issues. But, by taking on the media as institutions within which the struggle for gender equality is situated, activists will create also the opportunities for priming the media to be a credible voice when it reports on and covers gender equality issues.

Often gender and media activists are tackling both of these angles at the same time. The media cannot be used as an effective and credible tool to advance messages on gender equality if the messages it sends daily through reports on events and issues are gender blind or negative about women's roles and contribution in a society. Likewise, the media cannot challenge the lack of women in decision-making in governance structures, if there is a paucity of women in leadership positions within the media.

In targeting the media to bring about more gender sensitivity and awareness to the editorial content and to ensure equal opportunity and equal access for women in media work spaces, gender and media activists are at the same time opening the space to engage more effectively with the media in getting across messages on gender equality.

The Media as a Critical Area of Concern

While gender activism around the media has been ongoing for more than 40 years, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) which was developed by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, provided gender and media activists with more ammunition for gender and media advocacy.

The BPFA calls for "increased participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new communication technologies." Governments committed themselves to review media policies and increase the number of programs for and by women and to promote balanced and diverse portrayals of women in the media.¹²

Governments also are urged in the BPFA to create legislation against the projection of violence against women and children in the media and to encourage training for women in using the media. The media are encouraged to establish professional guidelines and methods of self-regulation for the way women are presented, as well as to support and finance alternative media and all forms of communication that support the needs of women.¹³

Section J on Media as one of the Platform's Critical Areas of Concern, recognizes that the media have a role to play in addressing issues of gender inequality, specifically,

-
¹²Local Action, Global Change, UNIFEM and the Centre for Women's Global Leadership, 1999 ¹³ Ibid

17

women's lack of access to media; the fact that women in the industry are generally not in decision-making positions; and the portrayal of gender stereotypes.¹⁴

The BPFA proposes that governments promote women's equal participation in the media; encourage women's media networks; and promote research and implementation of information strategies to ensure a balanced portrayal of women and men. The BPFA calls on media organizations and NGOs to develop diverse and balanced representations of women; establish groups to monitor the media; and train women to make greater use of information technology.¹⁵

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action also states that the impact of the media on women is generally negative:

“...Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society. Programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting. The world-wide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately.”¹⁶

At the five-year review of the 1995 Beijing Conference in New York in 2000, out of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, 53% of the countries cited media as their top priority for achieving gender equality in reports to the United Nations for the five-year review.¹⁷

Box Five: The impact of globalization

The spread of satellite communications and the opening up of the airwaves and other forms of media to less state-regulation in favor of free markets and commercial interests creates new gender and media challenges for activists. These include:

• Corporate ownership of media that has forged powerful political and business links and sets limits on freedom of expression

- Foreign ownership of media that has implications for accountability issues

• The creation and interpretation of news that are shaped and influenced by factors associated with the control of media by governments, advertisers and business groups

¹⁴Whose News? Whose Views?, edited by Colleen Lowe Morna, Gender Links, 2001 ¹⁵

Ibid

¹⁶Only Silence will Protect You, Women, Freedom of Expression and Language of Human Rights, Jan Bauer, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, Montreal, 1996 ¹⁷

Whose news? Whose views? Southern Africa Gender in Media Handbook, edited by Colleen Lowe Morna, 2001

• Existing media codes that do not have a gender concern or address issues such as the portrayal of violence against women

- The presence of transnational media corporations and the consequent beaming of homogenous media images and perceptions of women

• Access of pornographic material and databanks on women through the Internet, video tapes and DVDs and also through the print media

• Access of computer and video games that violate women's images and reinforce violence against women

Source: 'Globalization of the Media and its implications for women's expression', Meena M. Shivdas, Media Development 3/2000

Activity- Discussion Points!

1. What media issues are stated in your country's report to the Beijing +5 and Beijing +10 reviews as areas of concern?
2. Which of these areas cited have been the focus of gender and media advocacy in your country?
3. Which issue(s) has not been the focus of gender and media advocacy? 4. Which issues would your organization prioritize for gender and media advocacy? Why?

Approaches to Gender and Media Advocacy

Various strategies are in use throughout the world to promote gender equality in the media. No one approach will suffice given the complexity of the media and the national media landscapes with their own specificities.

To be at their most effective, gender and media activists should not be antagonistic towards the media and those working within. Taking time to learn how the media works, how and why journalists choose the sources they do, how sub-editors do their jobs, and who are the key players in media decision-making (such as chief editors and increasingly advertising executives and media owners), can provide activists with much needed insight into where opportunities for intervention and lobbying lie within the media.

Gender and media activists often use a combination of strategies. These include the following:

- The creation of gender and media networks and associations which push for change through dialogues, discussions, research and media monitoring. Examples include the Gender and Media Southern Africa (GEMSA) Network (<http://www.gemsa.org.za>), Sur Profesionales in Latin America

(<http://www.sitiosur.cl/organizacion.asp>) and the Asian Network of Women in Communication, among others

19

- Women have created alternative media in the form of newsletters, journals, radio, video productions, and now on-line publications. One of the most important contributions of women's alternative media is to provide a space for serious reflection about the nature of women's exclusion from the mainstream. Examples of women's alternative media include the Women's Feature Service (WFS) based in New Delhi, India (<http://wfsnews.org/>), FIRE radio in Latin America (<http://www.fire.or.cr/>), the Africa Women and Child Feature Service, based in Nairobi, Kenya (<http://www.awcfs.org/>), among others.
- Gender activists have developed tools to monitor the media on its coverage of violence against women, women in politics, women as sources, the portrayal of women, among

other areas of concern. These exercises began to provide specific data and analysis that could be presented to the media which highlighted professional gaps in news and other forms of reporting, as well as examples of how the media violates its own principles of accuracy, fairness and balance.

Box Six: Gender and Media Activism

In their recently released study on feminist media activism worldwide, feminist communications and media scholars Carolyn Byerly and Karen Ross pose a Model of 'Women's Media Action'. Based on interviews with some 90 women worldwide, the scholars identify four paths that characterize women's activism and engagement with the media:

Politics to Media – Feminists decide to begin to use media as part of some part of their feminist political work. These women move from being 'feminist activists' to producing media products of some kind.

Media Profession to Politics – Women employed in media industries decide to use their vantage point as insiders to expand women-related content or to reform the industry's policies to improve women's professional status. These women are trained media professionals, and at some point in their career, they develop a strong identity (and perhaps involvement) with feminism and begin to explore ways of increasing information about women in media content. Some also seek to make company policies more egalitarian.

Advocate Change Agent – Women who pressure media to improve treatment of women in one or more ways. The outside advocate's path often entails research and analysis about women and media, including publication of reports or articles, or they may mobilize a constituency to write letters or take some action.

Women-owned Media – This path allows women the maximum control over message production and distribution. Examples of this include book and magazine publishing, syndicated radio programming, women's news agencies and independent film and video companies.