



## Introduction

### Why We Do Gender in Media Studies

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In putting together this special issue of *African Media Review*, I was compelled to do a little soul searching when I was asked why a special issue on gender and media was needed. The basis of the question was that the subject had been tackled in several books and journals and was hardly deserving of scholarly attention at the moment. My response was simple. The subject of gender in media has not been interrogated enough in Africa. Indeed, given the phenomenal changes taking place in gender relations, transformations in the media landscape resulting from re-democratisation and the spread of new information and communication technologies, gender has become an even more important unit of analysis in media scholarship than ever before. The relationship between media and gender is complex, paradoxical and constantly in flux, perhaps the reason why we must continually interrogate it.

We are two years shy of celebrating the 40th anniversary of the first World Conference on Women, organized by the United Nations in Mexico City in 1975, where the media was first mentioned as a tool that should be used in the pursuit of women's equality. It was not until the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing 20 years later, however, that the media became one of 12 critical areas of concern. Section J of the Beijing Platform for action noted the influence that communication and the media have on public policy as well as on private attitudes and behaviour, and called for improvements in media content as well as access for women (UN1995). Since Beijing, media and gender academics have intensified their interest in the media's complicity in our 'gendered lives' (Wood 1994). This has resulted in a corpus of insightful scholarly articles addressing questions of representational practices, production, careers, access and participation in the media in Africa.

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Beijing came at an opportune time when much of the continent was undergoing political and economic transformation. Many countries were not only adopting neo-liberal economic policies, but also constitutions and laws that protected and promoted both media and gender rights. Millions of African women and men now have better access to a plethora of traditional media and, to a lesser extent, Internet and social media.

Such developments provide plenty of stimulation for research, advocacy and action on both outstanding and new issues, part of the reason why CODESRIA's 2011 edition of its annual Gender Symposium was on "Gender and Media in Africa". Held in Cairo, Egypt, the idea was to renew reflection and interrogation on the media, using the gender paradigm. For this reason, the symposium put a series of questions on the table for discussion by participants who were mostly drawn from the academia and the four sub-regions of Africa – North, South, East and West.

Of concern was whether and how the media could go beyond reproducing stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity to deconstruct and disrupt gender power relations, and also to build the civic capacities of women. Also explored were questions relating to new media – the Web, the blogosphere, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. – and their ability to provide access and new spaces for women to express themselves. In light of how quickly media has proliferated on the continent in the last two decades, the symposium sought to discover the effect of media pluralism as well as and also the commodification of information on gender inequalities, and to query gender disparity in the media, especially at the level of decision-making.

The articles contained in this special issue build on the conversations initiated at the Cairo Symposium and try to make sense of the shifts and transformations in media and gender relations in Africa. Some bring new perspectives to bear on how traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) continue to be implicated in questions of gender, while others address new questions raised by new media forms and formats. Four articles (three in French and one in English) tackle the impact of ICTs and social media from different theoretical perspectives, locations and experiences (see Palmieri, Kane, Rouamba and Mbure). Three other articles examine the representational practices of newspapers and magazines in political and social discourses relating to gender (see Anate, Ossome and Eshiet). The contribution by Chiweshe and Bhatasara reflects on popular culture, specifically the construction of gender in music, while that of Yeboah and Thompson examine on the

outstanding qualities that enable three women to rise to decision-making positions in the public relations, advertising and broadcast industries in Ghana.

Collectively, these contributions provide us with sound empirical arguments, suggesting that while there have been some changes in the construction and manifestation of gender in the African media, questions persist on fundamentals such as definitions and values, representations and portrayals, access and exclusion as well as power and control.

## **References**

- United Nations Fourth Conference on Women, 1995, Beijing Platform for Action (Section J, Women and Media), New York: United Nations (U.N.).
- Wood, J., 1994, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, Wadsworth Publishing.

