

Introduction: Contextualising Media's Representations of Gender Issues in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Feminist discourse on African media remains largely traditional – frequently critiqued as misogynistic – and anchored in patriarchal hegemony. (Dralega, 2016, p. 247).

Introduction

Despite advances in civil rights and legal protections, restrictive gender stereotypes persist in many contexts. Media are among the most pervasive and powerful forces shaping how men and women are perceived in society. They play a key role in producing and reinforcing sociocultural expectations and pressures. Media are deeply embedded in daily life, influencing politics and the broader structures of power in every environment. Media content, whether intentionally or not, often perpetuates unrealistic, stereotypical, and marginalising perceptions as it infiltrates audiences' consciousness. Koenig and Eagly (2014) defined gender stereotypes as a dangerous streamlined concept of attitudes and behaviours positioned as normal and appropriate for men and women in a specific cultural sphere. Wood (2009, p. 86) identifies three key themes in the media's portrayal of gender: underrepresentation, which presents men as the cultural norm while women are rendered invisible; stereotyping, which reinforces socially accepted gender roles; and depictions of relationships between men and women that often emphasise traditional roles and normalise violence against women and other marginalised groups. These portrayals reinforce socially constructed gender norms and contribute to the normalisation of sexual harassment, rape, and gender-based violence (GBV), which disproportionately affect women – even within media institutions themselves.

Gender and Media Representation: Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa, 1–8



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doi:10.1108/978-1-83608-406-820251001

Despite the increase in visibility and voices of women in media content in Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, women are depicted as passive and disinterested in the issues at hand more often than not (Akinbobola 2020; Jjuuko & Njuguna, 2019a). In her 2016 article ‘Media, capacity building and gender parity: why we shouldn’t look away’, Dralega points out how feminist discourse on media in Africa has largely been conservative and is often described as ‘misogynistic’ and deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. She argues gender inequality persists, particularly in the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of gender issues and employment, although women’s absence in leadership, management, and ownership in media also needs addressing (Dralega, 2016). Socially constructed roles, behaviours, and attributes assigned to men and women strongly influence news media production and the resulting discourses, which often further reinforce gender stereotypes (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). How gender issues are integrated into the news production and consumption cycle is, needless to say, among the critical tests of a professional media.

In general, the female folk are stereotypically associated with the home and characteristics such as supportiveness, compassion, expression, warmth, whereas the male folk are stereotypically associated with agency (e.g. action, competitiveness, ambition, and assertiveness) and competence (e.g. intelligence and skill). Should their actions be inconsistent with these stereotypical norms, both genders are likely to experience a backlash from the media and their audiences. In the political arena, for instance, common gender stereotypes relate to how women leaders or politicians are perceived and represented by the media and in communication discourses in ways that undermine their potential as capable leaders (Campus, 2013; Ross & Byerly, 2014). In addition to claims of biased coverage of women’s issues, research also has uncovered other unequal gender tendencies and irregularities within the media industry, including salary discrepancies, inequitable allocation of journalistic roles between male and female journalists, male dominance in management positions, and a general misconstruction of the concept of gender equality and its implications in the media (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

The implementation of policies that create gender-inclusive environments in both media education and journalism practice is a key concern in media development in Sub-Saharan Africa. These policies aim to ensure that journalism equitably represents the views and aspirations of all members of society and fulfils its role as a watchdog and voice for all (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Although many media houses have established gender policies, uncertainties about their operationalisation or implementation proliferate and foster incongruous handling of sexual harassment and discrimination cases (Akinbobola & Charles-Hatt, 2021; Ryan & Karen, 2019; Ward & Grower, 2020).

Similar gender issues impact media education not only in relation to students’ admission and enrolment into journalism or communication training institutions but also in relation to the curricula (Akinbobola, 2020). In their gender audit of journalism institutions in eastern Africa, Dralega et al. (2016) found that these departments harboured negative attitudes towards gender mainstreaming and had gender insensitive curricular and supported limited gender research. In addition to the limited presence of women in journalism programmes in some of Sub-Saharan

Africa, several studies have revealed that the few women who study journalism rarely end up employed in the media sector (Akinbobola, 2020; Akinbobola & Charles-Hatt, 2021; Ryan & Karen, 2019). This trend is attributed to either the lack of interest or opportunities and inadequate investment opportunities in the sector. The few women who are highly motivated to proceed into the field are frustrated by gender inequalities (Akinbobola, 2020). Nevertheless, the growing global awareness of gender issues, especially in the Global South, has increased women's recognition and led to the integration of a module or two on gender into academic programmes (Akinbobola & Charles-Hatt, 2021; Jjuuko & Njuguna, 2019b).

Given the vital role of media in society, these issues raise concerns for gender equality and equity, and particularly about how media discourse represents and constructs them. Hence, this edited volume also engages the functions (and challenges) of media and communication in the promotion of equal representation of women and, to some extent, minority groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and teases out the interdisciplinarity between these sectors. The central thesis of this book is that how the media talks about its practices and how it actually practises the representation of gender issues requires scrutiny. The contributors consider not only the factors that influence the representations and constructions of these issues but also how particular issues are included in the discourse and others are left out. *Gender and Media Representations: Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa*, therefore, positions media as central advocates for social justice, particularly in relation to gender and minority groups and emphasises how the connections between media, gender, and representation inform and complement each other. The essays highlight the importance of building resilience among media practitioners and equipping them to navigate challenges, promote equitable gender representation, and advocate for broader social change.

Our central argument is that while media in Sub-Saharan Africa and the global South are strategically positioned to address such developmental issues as gender equality and social justice, current shifts, and trends in media and communication – both positive or negative – undermine their potential to promote democracy and inclusive development. Political and economic pressures, as well as the transition to digital media, have transformed media operations and audiences in ways that do not favour diverse representation. This transformation limits minority groups' perspectives, experiences, and knowledge in media content, employment, and consumption. This ultimately also excludes them from policymaking, planning, and decision-making processes. While technology has facilitated faster, more accessible communication across wider sections of society, it has also disrupted the quality of information and exacerbated social, political, and economic inequalities. It is crucial that we critically examine the role of media in shaping gender, identity, and representation from an African perspective (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

Key Concepts in This Volume

Although the collection of essays in this book employs a rich and diverse range of concepts that resonate with its core concerns, some are common: media,

representation, gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender mainstreaming, empowerment, and GBV. 'Media' is used as an umbrella term for all channels or means of general communication, news or information, or entertainment in society and includes broadcast (radio and television), newspapers, and such social media platforms as X, Facebook, and YouTube. Media are central in a democracy because they provide the information based on which individuals make their own decisions. The media monitor the health of a democracy by publishing reports, agendas, and threats, reporting political, social, and economic decisions, and shedding light on public opinion (Jjuuko, 2023). 'Representation' refers to how groups or identities of people, voices, events, stories, and issues are included or excluded and constructed in media reports (Jjuuko & Prinsloo, 2014). It draws attention to why some of these issues are recurrently represented – and exclusions – why others are constantly ignored and, thus, excluded (Jjuuko, 2023). The representations are recognised as selective and structured by the values and the discursive practices of media institutions.

Gender, gender equality, and equity have public concerns since United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution 31/136 established the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) on 15 December 1975. The UN-sponsored initiatives, events, and programmes engaged issues affecting women on the global scale, including remuneration equity, gendered violence, land ownership, and human rights. Gender has been defined as the socially constructed characteristics of men, women, boys, and girls. They include, among others, the social, psychological, cultural, and behavioural traits of being a woman, man, or other gender identity, including sex-based social structures and gender expression. In this project, gender equality and equity are both understood in the context of social justice. Equality demands that all human beings, regardless of their gender, be free to develop their individual capacities and make choices without the restrictions set by stereotypes, unyielding gender roles, or prejudices. Equity describes impartiality of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs, and the systems that support it (EIGE, 2017). 'Gender mainstreaming', a process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programmes in any area and at all levels, has been an approach to foster gender equality and equity in several societies (ILO, 2022). Such efforts have led to women's empowerment (Jjuuko & Njuguna, 2019a). The practice of 'empowerment' has motivated minority and underprivileged groups, such as rural women, to take control of their lives by giving people knowledge, skills, authority, and opportunity and holding them responsible and accountable for outcomes of their actions (Jjuuko & Njuguna, 2019a). Socially ascribed gender differences result in wide range of harmful actions perpetrated against people's wills because of their gender, and this volume refers to all those actions as 'gender-based violence'.

Aims and Rationale

This edited volume offers critical contributions to the study of media, gender equality and equity, and social justice in Sub-Saharan Africa. It conceptualises

issues of gender representation, gender equality, and social inclusion within the framework of gender mainstreaming, as defined by the UN SDGs (Goal 8) as well as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2013), which advocates for the inclusion of all marginalised groups, not just women (p. 7). The book provides insights into gender norms, roles, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives – women, men, and minorities – in policymaking, planning, and decision-making processes. It problematises current gender imbalances in media institutions and the media’s role in representing these issues through national and regional ontologies and epistemologies. The various chapters showcase the wide range of considerations for media practitioners while researching or reporting on issues around gender in developing democracies and make significant contributions to our understandings of current trends and shifts in media representation. It brings together empirical research from several African countries – Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda – to add depth through regional diversity and cross-country analysis.

In short, this collection offers a comprehensive analysis of the common reference points for achieving gender inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa and can be a vital resource for educators and scholars because it provides new knowledge on how gender issues like women’s leadership, political participation, and gender policies in media workplaces are framed within media discourses. Its approach aligns with the works of scholars like Gadzekpo (2009), who called for more feminist media scholarship in Africa, and more recent studies that explore the impact of economic and political factors on feminist media institutions (Adjin-Tettey, 2020; Dralega et al., 2016, 2022). Many contributions highlight the media’s potential role in fostering resilience among practitioners, particularly through its capacity to combat inequality and promote gender balance in society. By synthesising global perspectives with African realities, the volume offers both theoretical and practical vantage points on the intersection of media, gender, representation, and resilience.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. Section I focuses on *gender representation, construction, and portrayal* and consists of eight chapters. Section 2 focuses on *digital media spaces and gender empowerment* and consists of seven chapters.

Chapter 1, titled ‘Conceptualising Participation as Representation, Interaction, and Engagement’, conceptualises ‘participation’ as representation, interaction, and engagement (RIE). Emily Comfort Maratho and Solveig Omland trace the central concepts in the study of women’s participation in public life through the lens of the media and present and advocate for the RIE model. In Chapter 2 entitled, ‘How the Tanzanian Press Portrayed the Country’s First Female President Samia Suluhu Hassan in a Non-stereotypical Manner’, Theodorah S. Munisi and Terje Skjerdal disclose constructive journalism practices within the Tanzanian media landscape, highlighting a gender-sensitive portrayal of the country’s first female president, thereby challenging common socio-norms and previous studies. Denis Ikachoi’s and Joseph Njuguna’s Chapter 3 provides

a content analysis of 'Media Representations of Women Candidates in Kenya's 2022 General Elections'. Their findings indicate that the frequency of coverage of female candidates was erratic and included only 'popular' candidates regularly, whereas male candidates frequently featured and dominated the front pages and editorials. In Chapter 4, 'Critiquing Language and Discourse in "Rwanda 20 Years On: The Tragic Testimony of the Children of Rape" Newspaper Article', Margaret Jjuuko demonstrates how the mode in which media represent events and subjects in conflict situations is likely to shape negative or positive views about them and have ideological effects on the represented. She argues that greater responsibility and ethical procedures are needed when reporting on sensitive matters related to such vulnerable groups as women and children. In Chapter 5 titled, 'Unveiling Voices and Visibility: Women's Engagement and Representation in Three Morning Prime-time Radio Shows in Accra, Ghana', Theodora Dame Adjin-Tettey, Manfred Kofi Antwi Asuman, and Mary Selikem Ayim-Segbefia report on their insightful case study of three radio morning shows' gender representations and women's engagement in those prime morning radio shows. 'Exploring the Affordance of Equality and Equal Opportunities to Female Journalists in Rwanda's Media' is undertaken in Chapter 6 by Margaret Jjuuko and Solveig Omland. They argue that gender mainstreaming in the Rwandan media should foster gender equality by developing capacity, inclusiveness, and non-discriminatory work environments. In a comprehensive review of literature on how abortion is communicated in the mass media, executed in Chapter 7, titled 'Communicating Abortion in the Mass Media: A Literature Review of the Challenges and Possibilities', Jeanne d'Arc Mukamana, Emma Durden, and Sarah Gibson systematically identify the challenges and possibilities as they unfold in literature. Aurelia Ayisi's Chapter 8, 'Mainstreaming Gender in Postgraduate Journalism and Communication Programmes in Ghana', concludes Section I. She investigates whether and how gender issues are taught in journalism and communication post-graduate programmes in Ghana and advocates for a gendered responsive curriculum to address the missing links in balanced representation and improve the status of women in media.

Section II of the book focuses on the use and abuse of digital media platforms (including broadcast and social media) in addressing gender inclusion, equality, and GBV as well as examining ways of empowering young journalists. In Chapter 9, Eva Solomon's 'Digital Storytelling in Social Media: A Cultural Activity and a Media Style in Fighting Gender-based Violence in Tanzania', draws on narrative and feminist theories to explore two key questions: What GBV themes are conveyed through DST, and how does DST help delineate GBV? In Chapter 10, 'Gender Mainstreaming in AI-enhanced Journalism Practice, Education, and Research in African Contexts', Carol Azungi Dralega identifies key gender-related issues in AI-enhanced media environments and proposes specific toolkits for gender mainstreaming. 'Digital Safety: Perspectives from Women Journalists in Uganda' by Fred Kakooza and Samuel Kazibwe in Chapter 11 highlights how digital spaces both empower women journalists and expose them to threats, violations, and harassment. Anne Anjao Eboi's 'YouTube Videos as Agents of Social Inclusion and Therapy Among Gender-based Violence Survivors', analyses the

portrayal of GBV in YouTube videos from a Kenyan perspective in Chapter 12. Chapter 13, titled 'Community Radio in Building Resilience Against Gender-Based Violence in Tanzania: A Case of Radio Sengerema', by Dianus Josephat Ishengoma, calls for more radio programmes on GBV, involving local leaders in broadcasts and educating the public on cultural barriers to women's participation in decision-making. Joseph Njuguna reviews 17 journal articles on the empowerment of Kenyan women over the past decade, focussing on women from slums and rural, semi-arid areas in Chapter 14, titled 'Community Radio as an Enabler of Women's Empowerment in Kenya: A Systematic Review of Scholarly Evidence'. These women, often illiterate, information-poor, and culturally marginalised, possess significant untapped potential. Finally, in Chapter 15, 'Gendered Power Relations and Culture of Silence: An Exploration of Female Interns' Sexual Harassment Experiences in Nigerian Newsrooms', Bimbo Lolade Fafowora investigates how female interns cope with sexual harassment and the policies available for victims to seek justice and empower future internees.

The authors are not only experts in media and gender studies but also advocates for social justice and human rights who bring personal and professional experiences of discrimination to their analyses. The collection contributes significantly to the scant literature on media's representations of gender and related issues in Sub-Saharan Africa (including media institutions/newsrooms, media content, media curricula, among others) and is a rich resource for academics, media practitioners, policymakers, gender activists, and students. In short, these chapters will be valuable to anyone interested in identifying methodologies, procedures, and principles to make decision-making more deliberative such that men, women, and other minority groups can better connect their individual views to public debate that is non-discriminatory, inclusive, gender-sensitive, and open to diverse views.

For most media organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa, balanced gender representation is still a work in progress. Our contributors agree that concerted efforts to adequately sensitise stakeholders and measures to monitor and guide adherence are still crucial.

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