

# THE MASS MEDIA AND THE CHALLENGES OF PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

The promotion of gender equality and women empowerment (Goal number 3) of the Millennium development Goals (MDGs) has become one of the yardsticks for development especially in developing countries by the year 2015. This paper examines the contentious issues of gender imbalance and opines that for sustainable development to be visible, women must be empowered and the disparity between them and their male counterparts removed. In doing this, the paper critically assesses the crucial role of the mass media in the promotion of gender equality and concludes that a lot more needs to be done on the part of the media. It recommends a re-orientation among media practitioners, media pluralism, and practical freedom of speech, among others.

In the modern world, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have become a yardstick for measuring development in the different worlds and nations. One of such goals (which is the focus of this paper) is the promotion of gender equality.

The relegation of women in all spheres of economic, social and political activities has been based, most often on false assumption concerning the actual and potential roles of women in development. This attitude underlines lack of consideration for women issues:

The lack of recognition of women's contribution to socio economic development causes bias in the delivering of development

services. The result is a failure to include women in the nation's development objectives. Ensuring equality between women and men and increasing the effectiveness of the participation of women in society, requires the striking of a balance in social, economic and political power between the two sexes. (Iroanusi, 2006:14)

The plight of women has been gaining attention since 1946 when the United Nations organization established the UN Commission on the status of women. This was followed with the declaration of 1975 as the international women's year, and a decade for women (1975-1985). The recurring theme has been equality, development and peace.

Authorities all over the globe are probably agreed that gender equality in all nations of the world is a pre-requisite to genuine sustainable development. The MDGs (2005), of the UN corroborates this, when it highlighted the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, as one of the goals (Goal No 3), it states:

Gender equality is a human right and at the heart of achieving the millennium development Goals. It is a prerequisite to overcoming hunger, poverty and disease. This means equality at all levels of education and in all areas of work, equal control over resources and equal representation in public and political life.

Since no nation is an island unto its self, it is the contention of this paper that this type of recognition at the international level, ought to motivate leaders who are committed to achieving the Goals at the national level to dialogue and concede to women, in order to avoid conflicts and encourage development.

However, the onerous task for promoting gender equality and empowerment, rest squarely on the mass media. To what extent have they been performing this role? This is the focus of this paper.

### **Definition of Keywords**

**Gender:** Gender, according to The Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (2001:1), refers to a system of roles and the relationship between women and men that are determined not biologically but in social, political and economic context. Gender can equally be seen as the “process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male and The Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre defined attributes of masculinity and femininity”.

The definition of gender as socially meaning ascription to male or female sex shows that its structuring based on sex is not a biological fact of life. The trust of gender analysis is that beyond biological differences, all other differences between men and women are socially constructed and have no logical relationships with their biological composition.

**Empowerment:** According to The Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC,2001:15), empowerment entails enhancing the relative power position of women to men, ultimately leading to the equality and partnership of sexes. Empowerment is the act of being informed, the acquisition of knowledge or skill that will lead to attitudinal changes, it involves capacity building,

consciousness raising, building self esteem, enhancements that enable the individual to make informed choices and take responsibility for her actions”.

Empowerment of women has been globally recognized as the surest way of counteracting harmful traditional practices (HTPs) that hinder women’s participation. The process of continuous sensitization and mind development can achieve this.

**Development:** there are various definitions of development according to who is defining it and the field in which it is being defined. Put succinctly, there is no one acceptable definition but development should have the following features, as enunciated in Okunna (2002:294):

- i. Development should bring change;
- ii. This change should be for the better;
- iii. The change should be for the benefit of the majority of the people;
- iv. The process should be participatory, that is, involve the people as closely as possible.

Yahaya (2003:100) agreed with the above features of development when he asserts that the concept of development should be critically viewed from a holistic perspective. This implies national development with human face, where programmes initiated will bring about improvement in the existing circumstances of the people (men and women, adult, youth and children).

Citing Seer, Yahaya (surpra: 101) summed up development thus:

The questions to ask about a countries development are: what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of underdevelopment for all the countries concerned. If one or two of these

central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result “development” even if per capital income doubled.

It is no longer tenable in developing countries, like Nigeria, that development is equal in effect to modernization, based on the premise that industrialized countries were once like developing countries and became what they are today based on hard work, thrift and creativity. After all, developing countries have their own peculiarities which must be addressed internally without necessarily borrowing a leaf from outside.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This paper is anchored on the social responsibility theory. Ekeli (2008:293), quoting Sibert (1956:76), explains the main preoccupation of the press (mass media) “as servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate in public affairs. Enlightening the public as to make it capable of self-government and safeguarding the right of the individual and by serving as a watchdog for the People, thereby holding Government accountable to the People”. The theory posits that the power and near-monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible. To see that all sides are fairly represented and the public has enough information to decide. (Agbanu, 2009:40).

The theory of social responsibility involves a view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship, rather than as an unlimited private franchise. A mass medium that uses sexist language, stereotype and segregation among gender cannot be said to be socially responsible and can do little or nothing to champion the plight of women. A socially responsible media, as McQuail (2005:185) puts it is the one whose “right to freedom of

publication is accompanied by obligations to the wider society that go beyond self interest. Responsible media will maintain high standard by self-regulation but government intervention is not excluded. Mechanism of accountability to society and public will be in place.”

Gender equalities and women empowerment can be actively promoted by the mass media when the social responsibility is strictly adhered to. The present patriarchal structure where mass media organization’s management position are occupied by males, at the expense of their female counterparts is not a good example of a socially responsible media. The media should begin to see themselves as socially responsible for promoting the cause of women in our society, by bringing to the fore the perceived imbalance noticed in virtually all spheres, (political, economical, and social) of life, in order to gradually help in bridging the gap. The mass media lose their claim to the right the society confers on them if they abuse or fail to give equal attention to the plight of both male and female or they give more attention to males at the expense of their female counterparts.

### **Women and National Development**

Traditionally, women in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, are very often relegated when it comes to issue that affect the community as a whole. They are made subservient and consequently become complacent when issues touching the very lives of the entire community are involved. As Okonkwo (2007:100) puts it, “this is despite the fact that women constitute a greater percentage of the average Nigerian community and that due to their traditional roles as care givers and sometimes breadwinners they are better placed to make lasting impact in the community”.

The link between poverty and environmental degradation for instance is well established. Eradication of poverty has been

recognized as indispensable to development. The empowerment of the world's poor, the majority of whom are women particularly rural women, has been seen as a necessary part of any environmental conservation strategy, (Okonkwo, 2007:412). That the capabilities of women in national development are no longer in doubt is evident in the recognition accorded them by many world governments. Many world governments have appreciated the need to put women in environmental decision-making, by increasing their access to information and education, particularly in the areas of science, technology and economics.

According to the "review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing platform for action of the Secretary General published by the UN department of information," may 2000;

1. Iran has organized workshop on women's participation in environmental protection in order to increase the number of women working to preserve natural resources. It has also created a special department in the environmental protection office for training and programming that work to protect rural women's contribution to environmental protection activities.
2. The Congo, Mali and Moldova are among those countries that have implemented training programmes to raise the environmental consciousness of women and to transfer know-how on agricultural technologies and methods to them.
3. Germany has developed a project called "girls for ecological Europe", which motivates and supports girls who want to get involved in the field of ecology.
4. Jordan has embarked on the training of rural women in the proper use of all pesticides and

fertilizers, as well as in the use of modern irrigation methods.

5. In china, an annual campaign entitled "March 8 Green Works" has involved the participation of an estimated 100 million women every year. The campaign focuses on reforestation, the creation of shelter forest and water conservation.
6. Among others.

In many developing countries of the world, women in first position achievement are legion, but are not promoted like their male counterparts. A catalogue of such women in Nigeria for example, as enunciated by Iroanusi (2006), becomes handy; They are:

Professor Alele Williams -1<sup>st</sup> Female professor of Mathematics

Professor (Mrs) Elfrida Adebo – 1<sup>st</sup> Female

Professor of Nursing

Professor Chinyere Stella Okunna – 1<sup>st</sup> Female

Professor of Mass Communication

Professor Bolanle Awe – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Historian

Dr Doyin Abiola - 1<sup>st</sup> Female Editor-in-Chief

Dr Grace Guobadia – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Dentist

Dr Edith Ike Mark Odu – 1<sup>st</sup> Nigeria Female Information Scientist

Engr. (Mrs) S. Maduka – 1<sup>st</sup> Female regd. Engineer

Chief folake Solanke – 1<sup>st</sup> Female SAN

Chief (Mrs) Teju Alakija - 1<sup>st</sup> Female Head of Civil Service

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Chief (Mrs) E. O yagbola – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Fed. Minister

Chief E.F Afegbua – 1<sup>st</sup> Female elected Senator  
Chief Bola Kuforiji-Olubi – 1<sup>st</sup> Female ICAN President

Brig. A. Kale – 1<sup>st</sup> Female highest ranking Army Officer

Mrs. O. Adekoya – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Surveyor

Mrs. Theresa Bowyer – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Newspaper Editor

Mrs. S.U. Omu – 1<sup>st</sup> Female highest ranking Officer (Prison)

Mrs. Cecilia Ugowe – 1<sup>st</sup> Female DIG (Police)

Mrs. E. Adegoke – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Founder of a Political Party

Mrs. Okapaisa – 1<sup>st</sup> highest ranking Female Officer (Customs)

Mrs. Eke Oku – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Librarian

Dr E. Abimbola Awoliyi – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Gynaccologist

Mrs. Rhoda Mohammed – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Ambassador

Mrs Stella Mark – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Lawyer

Miss Chinyere Onyechekwa – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Pilot

Adaora Ulasi – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Journalist

Toyin Olakunri – 1<sup>st</sup> Female Chartered Accountant

The above is by no means exhaustive, but it could be true that some people are hearing about them for the first time. We cannot also forget in a hurry the roles played by women like Mrs. Maryam Babangida, Professor Dora Akinyuli, Ngozi Okonjo- Iweala and others too

numerous to mention in our National Development.

The better life programme for rural women, which later changed to better life for rural dwellers, that, did a great job of sensitizing women politically, economically and otherwise, was initiated by Maryam Babangida. Through BLP, the Nigerian public became sensitized to the place and potential of women in the society and it also created an increased political awareness among women such that they now turn out enmasse during elections. Economically ,women especially the illiterate rural women, not schooled in the intricate performances of the formal sector of the Nigerian economy became part of it through their formation of co-operatives that enabled them to approach Banks for loans and engage in whatever they can to earn their own money.

Professor Dora Akunyuli (one time Director General of NAFDAC), is a woman of incorruptible seed, who has proven that nothing can be more truthful than the saying that “what a man can do, a woman can do better”. She saved the lives of many Nigerians who would have died of fake drugs, even at the expense of Her own Life. She is now seen by many (within and outside Nigeria) as a role model. She has represented Nigeria on many occasions, delivered numerous seminar papers and educating people on the dangers of fake drugs and contaminated food. You will agree without any shade of doubt that her success in NAFDAC made her the minister of information and communication today later.

Through Okonji Iweala, the feat that has never been achieved by any male finance minister in NIGERIA was actualized. Brought from the world bank by the then Nigeria former President – Obasanjo, as finance minister, she was able to negotiate with the Paris club who wrote-off Nigeria’s debt to the tune of several

billions of naira. Indeed many Women are still making their impact today.

From the above analysis, it is crystal clear that women are indispensable in the development of any country and should be given ample opportunity as their male counterparts in order to show case their abundant talents.

### **The Mass Media and the Promotion of Gender Equality in Nigeria**

The global web of print and electronic media is likened to that of the “nervous system” linking millions of the individual brains from enormous collective intelligence.

This is probably why Macbride, Abel, Beuve-Mercy, Ekonzo, and Marguez, Losev. (1980:xiii) asserted that mass media in the satellite era offer all peoples the possibility of simultaneously witnessing the same events, exchanging full information, understanding one another better, not withstanding their specific features, and valuing each other while acknowledging their differences.

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria clearly assigns a role to the media: section 21 directs that the media “shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”.

Unless citizens have adequate and accurate information on all the issues and problems confronting them, they will be unable to take enlightened decision on them. So also, without such information, they will be unable to comprehend the day-to-day working of the government and to participate in it. Nor will they be able to hold those in authority responsible for their acts of omission and commission (Sawant, 2000).

None of the functions which both women and any government can perform, as far as gender issues in general and gender equality

in particular, is concerned can be performed by them in the absence of full and truthful information. Who can furnish such information to the people at the local and international levels, constantly and regularly, except a mass communicator like the media?

As Sawant, (supra), rightly observe, “the mass media reach the largest section of the society directly or through secondary readership and viewership, regularly, constantly almost every hour of the day, and also intimately”. Apart from the twenty four hours news bulletins of the electronic media like television and radio, even newspapers are published at different hours of the day. With the advances in communication technology, the news can be collected from any part of the world.

The mass media in this regard serve to assist in the constant promotion of gender equality and empowerment by planning and mounting sustainable enlightenment campaigns for general awareness about the potential leadership quality of women and their role in sustainable development in developing countries. It is only the media that can serve to set the agenda towards the enforcement of gender equality and empowerment in all spheres for public debate, discussion, awareness, participation and help to mobilize the people.

Mowlana (1984) seems to corroborate this when he stated that the mass media must provide a voice to the dissenter and the downtrodden. Freedom of speech, of the press, and of information, are vital for the realization of human rights. The quest for women liberation can be championed by the mass media through a variety of ways. As Mowlana (supra) noted, they include:

1. Publicize violation of international conventions such as the international Bill of human rights, the Helsinki Final Act, and the united Nation charter.

2. Promote access of individuals to media outlet in the face of domination by elites or majorities.
3. Promote the democratization of communication by removing obstacles to the free interchange of ideas, information and experience among equals.

The onus lies on the media, as purveyor of information to promote extensive campaign, making use of public and private educational programmes, to disseminate information about and increase awareness of human right of women. The international media equally have the responsibility of reporting and presenting women as creative human beings, key actors and contributors to and beneficiary of the process of development.

Of course, the media are not the fundamental cause of the subordinate status of women, nor can it be remedied by the media alone. The causes are deeply rooted in social, economic and political structures, as well as in culturally determined attitudes, and solutions must be found in far-reaching changes. However, it is within the power of the media either to stimulate or to retard change to a significant degree. (MacBride, 1980:191)

Many women, the world over, are dying in silence. Unless they talk, they cannot be heard. The channels through which their voices will be heard, is the mass media. The right of free expression and the effective circulation of information and ideas, notably through the mass media, are among the key hallmarks of a democratic, participatory society. They are vital for ensuring democratic accountability, which is why the media have often been described as a fourth estate”, after the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. A well informed, conscious population is not only better able to work after its own interest at a personal or family level (in such matters as employment and income

generation, hygiene, health and education), but is much better placed to hold to account its government ( UNICEF, 2001)

### **How Has the Mass Media Faired in Performing These Roles?**

There is no gainsaying that the past decades have witnessed advances in information and communication technology (ICT), which have facilitated a global communications network that transcend national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitude and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere, the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. But how well has the media waken-up to the clarion call of mobilizing support for the women’s voice so that she can be recognized in all spheres of life?

It is mind boggling to observe that our national and international media BBC, VOA, CNN, Time Magazine, to mention a few, constantly monitor and report (either by straight news reporting, interpretation, opinion or editorials) such issues as wars, nuclear proliferations, HIV/AIDS, Poverty (especially in third world countries), little or no emphasis has been accorded gender issues. Most of the news and advocacy on gender are mostly reported in UN document, UNICEF report, NGOs and various websites. Not everybody has access to these. There has been no conscious effort by our mass media to promote gender issues such as equality and empowerment. Rather than building the gap, the media can be seen to be widening it.

The MacBride Report (1980), corroborated this when it observed that in general, inadequate attention is paid in the media to issues of specific importance to women. Women appear, in magazine fiction and television, drama and comedy as self depreciating and dependent, Irrational, superstitious and over emotional. In advertising particularly, women are shown either as house

wives whose interests are limited to domestic needs or as the sexually alluring background which make consumer goods more attractive by association. Even media houses themselves reflect this inequality. Journalists dealing with serious issues and political event are seldom women, and few women become editors or hold directing positions.

The pertinent question begging for answer is; how can the media “discriminate” women, mobilize support for the enforcement of human right of woman? Here lies the dilemma. A good number of studies conclude that the overall effects of the portrayal of women in the media is to reinforce, rather than to reduce prejudice and stereotypes.

The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotype that can be formed in public and private, local, national and international media organizations.

#### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

Merrill (1983) once captured the relevance of communication in the international arena when he asserts that “representatives of many nations come increasingly to conference tables to talk about the multitude of world problems and dangers, and ostensibly they desire to establish peace, and allay fears, gain global justices and improve world understanding through communication”. The mass media are in better position to provide a platform through which various gender issues-discrimination against woman, equality, genital mutilation, child marriage, sexual harassment and rape, to mention a few will be discoursed and peaceful resolution arrived at.

Any Governmental developmental agenda the world over and African countries in particular, will be a sham if equal rights are not given women whose role in national

development cannot be over emphasized. Meeting the MDGs (goal 3) promote gender equality and empower women by the year 2015, will be a mirage in African countries if the media do not wake up to their responsibilities of promoting women’s rights.

However, for the media to perform these functions effectively, there should be in place a well articulated legal guarantees and practical respect of the principles of freedom of expression. Apart from media diversity of pluralism (in ownership and ideas), not less important is a re-orientation in media organizations themselves on gender imbalance and sexist language. This is because you cannot give what you do not have.

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