

# Media - a hard nut to crack for women

By Arthur Okwemba & Colleen Lowe Morna

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Preliminary findings of the 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) conducted by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) suggests that women constitute less than a quarter of those interviewed, heard, seen or read about in mainstream broadcast and print news.



Launched during the 54th Commission on the Status of Women in New York, the initial report comprises results based on a one-day sample of 42 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean Region, Pacific Islands and Europe. It comprises 6,902 news items and 14,044 news subjects, including people interviewed in the news. Data is still rolling in, and input from North America is not yet available.

## Progress persistently slow

However, initial results suggest a rise from 17% in the first GMMP in 1995 to 24% of stories including women, still far from the desired 50%. However, the authors of the study are somewhat happy to see some progress, compared to the 1995 to 2000 period when the figure stagnated.

Lavinia Mohr, WACC's director of programmes, spoke during the report launched on Tuesday, 2 March 2010: "From 2005 to 2010 there is a second change of 3% which shows a pace of progress in gender-balance in the news that has remained persistently slow in the last ten years, but which is more rapid than the rate registered between 1995 and 2000."

The study found that news stories by female reporters rose from 29% to 35%. This echoes research by Gender Links, a non-governmental organisation working to promote women in and through the media, which found that in Southern Africa women comprise 41% of media personnel, though when South Africa (which has by far the largest media density) is taken out of the equation, the figure falls to 32%.

## Discouraged from joining media field

Journalists like Gertrude Makhafola, who has worked at the South African *Sowetan* for two years, have passion for the craft. "I love being a journalist," she says. Yet, like many, she understands the challenges facing women.

"If you come to work one day wearing a skirt or heels, your male colleagues will make statements like 'I didn't know you have those assets!' explained Makhafola. "This goes on everyday and it goes beyond simple compliments..." The research also found that perceptions that women cannot, or should not, cover certain beats or take on certain roles, discourages them from joining, and staying, in the media field.

According to the GMMP report, monitors identified stories mentioning, quoting or referring to relevant local, national, regional or international policy or legislation focused on gender equality or human rights. It found only 9% of stories contain this information, with the majority being in the Middle East (in 19% of stories).

Only 11% of stories in Africa and Asia each, 4% in the Caribbean and Latin America and 1% in the Pacific make mention of such instruments. This supports observations by gender and communication groups on the relative invisibility of human rights and specifically women's human rights in mainstream media content.

## No specific in-house targets

Similarly, in Southern Africa, while 54% of the region's media indicated they had specific targets for achieving gender equality, no media houses in the study could point to specific targets for ensuring gender equality in decision-making in line with the Southern African Development Community Gender Protocol 2015 parity target. Asked about the target deadline for gender parity, approximately half of respondents did not know. Gender and media activists have their work cut out to popularise such instruments with the media.

On the GMMP monitoring day, only 1.3 % of the stories were on gender, 0.3% on women's economic participation, 1.2% on poverty and 0.9% on peace-related issues. When it came to topics which media gives priority in their news agenda, politics and economy, the numbers of women interviewed or who were the subject of the story was worryingly low. Women as subjects in matters of economy increased marginally from 20% to 21%, while in the area of politics and government from 14% to 18%.

## Challenging stereotypes

The report suggests that Latin America leads as the region with the highest percentage of stories that challenge stereotypes (14%). In Africa, stories are almost 16 times more likely to reinforce than to challenge stereotypes. Scrutiny at the statistics reveals that stories by female reporters are less likely to reinforce and twice as likely to challenge stereotypes as stories by male reporters.

Teetee Zwane, editor of the "Business Desk" at the *Swazi Observer* agrees that women and men bring different perspectives to the table. "Compassionate news has been ignored for a long time. We haven't had that human feel to news. We need that female voice to push all that into the media."

She further adds, "No one has had the passion for issues important to women, and without the media creating awareness of these we will be a long way from gender equality. We have pushed these stories (abuse, HIV/AIDS) and are making people aware. But it's always a female reporter."

## Forming gender policies

Responding to the global findings launched in New York, Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls of FemLink Pacific: Media Initiatives for Women in Fiji, said the surest way to improve the coverage of women in the media is to institutionalise the issue through the formulation of gender policies to guide the editorial work.

Saniye Gulser Corat, UNESCO's director, Division of Gender Equality, Bureau of Strategic Planning warned that if substantive and innovative interventions do not happen now, then it "will take 75 years to achieve gender parity in the

media."

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