

WOMEN IN THE MEDIA - A BATTLE TO WIN

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Decades ago, the typical Ugandan woman was placed in the kitchen setting. She was a mother working extremely hard to sustain the life of both her children and her husband. She woke up early in the morning, prepared breakfast and readied the children for school; she picked up her hoe and went off to the garden; she returned in time to prepare lunch and wash clothes; and she planned for dinner. And this was the routine day after day. The male-dominated media paid scant attention to this Ugandan woman. Even the unmarried ones scarcely caught the attention of the media, for most stories were about men and men's achievements and escapades in society.

Fast forward to today. Not much seems to have changed in terms of male domination of the media. On the few occasions when women appear, it is usually for the wrong reasons, with the exception of a few in the elite class. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project of 2010, only 24% of people heard and read about in the media were women. This percentage is corroborated by a report published by the Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA), which puts women's coverage in the media at below 25%. This reflection is a disservice to the several hundreds of women working so hard every day to guarantee a future for the entire nation in many different ways.

According to a study by UMWA, the bulk of coverage on women is found in the daily

tabloid, the Red Pepper (45%), the Daily Monitor (30%) and the New Vision (17%). This trend is not much different from that in the broadcast media, and all this despite the fact that women constitute more than 50% of the nation's population.

But is this a coincidence or it is by design? A few hypotheses may explain the situation of women in Ugandan media. First, the situation goes back to the historical bias against women in society overall, coupled with the preponderance of male-dominated/male-owned media houses; and secondly, it stems from the perception of women as sexual objects.

To extrapolate this issue, it would be of interest to ask ourselves what the sources of news are! Some of the sources of news could be schools or the church or top business empires, cultural institutions or key government ministries or the military, soccer, the armed forces, name it. Whichever way you look at it, the placement of women as news sources is still something far from what the media offers in its current set-up and this may not change except with deliberate effort to ensure equity. Much of society is still male-dominated. A case in point is a perpetually male Pope at the helm of the Catholic Church. From the perspective of bizarre news sources, it is mostly men who drive public transport vehicles involved in road carnage; it is men who are involved in human sacrifice and human trafficking; it is men breaking traf-



fic rules; it is men perpetrating terrorism acts – and these are the things that make news.

In such a situation, therefore, women must work extremely hard to turn the tides through performance that exceeds the norm; for example, when a certain Dorcus Inzikuru wins gold or a First Lady is appointed a minister in her husband's government or a lady from the opposition is offered a ministerial post or in cases such as those of Allen Kagina (UNRA CEO) and Jeniffer Musisi (KCCA ED), all of whom have been handpicked to serve in their respective positions. On the other hand, an ordinary Ugandan woman working very hard still has little chance to be the focus of any media for as long as society remains biased in favour of men.

Sadly, consistent with the media principle of dog bites man/man bites dog, women continue to be the focus for the media for the wrong reasons. For example, when a former vice president made a bid for the leadership of the African Union, focus quickly

shifted away from whatever positive things she may have achieved as the country's number two to her private relationships, with other people suggesting that a male candidate would have stood a better chance. And, who can forget Makerere University's Stella Nyanzi or the media fabled Bad Black or the land scandal involving MP Muhanga? This is not to say that there is nothing good about these individuals. However, the trend of news focuses on what the audience wants to hear and not what the audience deserves to hear. The stories that appear in the Red Pepper and other tabloids daily showcasing nude women involved in one scandal or the other point to this trend. These stories will always receive media attention because such sexual imagery appeals to especially male readers who purchase the media products with a particular interest in mind. Even in the bizarre incident where an MP's daughter, Doreen, was crushed by a truck on Entebbe Road, the poor young lady made headlines not for anything else but the fact that she was a 'pretty lady' – and that is what the media capitalised on.

So where are we headed with all this? One discreet way around this scenario of limited, unfair and unbalanced coverage of women in the media would be to have a bigger number of 'women foot soldiers' who clearly understand and appreciate the world of women and who are, therefore, able to take full advantage of women's extraordinary strong points to compete favourably against male newsmakers. These foot soldiers could be female journalists or female media owners or females in top media management. There are obviously some males within the media world who truly appreciate women's efforts; these, too, ought to be deliberately co-opted into the struggle to achieve gender balance in the media.

At the end of the day, the battle of the sexes remains a reality that transcends the present-day generations; but it is one that can be neutralized only if we consciously keep trying.

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