ENHANCING GENDER CONSCIENCE IN UGANDAN MEDIA

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The power of the media in shaping public opinion through framing and agenda-setting makes it indispensible in the quest for gender parity. However, often what is produced in a patriarchal media only serves to entrench deep-seated stereotypes against women.

This underpins the need for women's representation at decision-making levels in media organisations. If the media is to portray women in a positive way, there have to be female journalists out there at decision-making level, willing and able to fight for women's rights in a much more fundamental way.

The Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media (2011) revealed that women represent only a third (33.3%) of the full-time journalism workforce in the 522 companies surveyed. Men hold the vast majority of the seats on governing boards and in top management across seven regions, sub-Saharan Africa inclusive.

This is in consonance with a report by the European Institute of Gender Equality, which notes that despite the fact that women have made up nearly half the workforce within the media industry in the European Union and accounted for more than half of tertiary-level graduates for media-related careers for many years, the proportion of women involved in

top-level decision-making in media organisations remains low.

In Uganda, the situation is not any different. Women occupy only 30% of low-ranking jobs in media houses. At senior management level, women occupy a dismal 3%. In fact, the trends don't show any signs of improvement over the years.

This is way below targets set during the fourth World Conference on Women. The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 advocated increased women's participation in decision-making in media organisations. Women's representation in the media is one of the 12 critical areas of concern. The programme for action aimed at protecting and promoting women's rights as integral, inalienable and indivisible.

In Uganda, while enrolment levels in academic institutions shows a higher intake for women than men in journalism courses, employment trends in media houses show something different. In low-ranking media jobs such as writers, women are ably represented, but the numbers keep declining as you go up the hierarchy. Women are still struggling to climb up the media ladder.

Several reasons responsible for this unfortunate trend include biases against women, unfair promotion procedures, lack of gender policies in media houses and cultural stereotypes.

Some interventions have been implemented in Uganda to address the gender gap in media organisations, but all efforts have come to naught. The invisible glass ceiling continuously deters women from reaching the top in media organisations because women who possess the skills, training and experience are often hindered from progressing by cultural biases and institutional misogyny. Such prejudices often surface during

recruitment, assigning tasks, training and promotion.

It is impossible to tackle equality in decision-making in media organisations without addressing the low numbers of women in media organisations. Deep-seated biases against women and a patriarchal media still limit women's representation in the media and decision making in media organisations.

To advance gender conscience in the media, government should support women's education, training and employment in the media through legislation. Government should ensure women's access to all levels of the media. Government should also pioneer gender balance in the appointment of men and women to all regulatory and monitoring bodies of state media. Women should participate in the development and monitoring of media polices.

This should result in media houses introducing polices aimed at promoting and supporting women's participation in the media. Media editorial and human resource policies should enshrine women's rights to participation in media decision-making. Women's organisations should support female journalists to stay in the media, and progress there as well.

Civil society organisations should pilot initiatives on promoting gender parity in the media. Organisations like Uganda Women's Media Association (UMWA) should also regularly monitor gender equality in the media. Media organisations should improve gender equality in the media through regular training, mentorship programmes and sharing applicable practices from peer countries.

Development agencies should support women's mentoring programmes, including fellowships where female journalists can visit and acquire skills

from other countries. They should pilot and support awards targeting female reporters.

Regulatory agencies should also support and regularly monitor women's participation in decision-making in media organisations. Quotas for women in decision-making positions should be part of the licensing requirements.

Journalism is still a risky business in Uganda, as many scribes have been attacked during work. There is also no protection for journalists in Uganda. The other fact is that journalism is still a low-paying profession in Uganda. There is need for the protection of female journalists by their employers. This is possible through collective bargaining in unions and worker's associations. Female journalists should form associations that can negotiate for better terms of employment. Such associations can also advocate gender parity at all decision-making levels in media organisations.

Much as enacting policies is crucial to addressing the gender gap in the media, this alone will not stop the deep-seated biases against women in the media. This is premised on the fact the perception is stronger than any law, and legislation, without public will, can be defeated. There must be an attitude change if the gender gap is to be addressed. This paradigm shift can be hastened through empowering women in the media, sensitisation, affirmative action and through gender-sensitive policies.

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