



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The portrayal of gender relations in the media: *Towards a gender sensitive media*

Kudakwashe Danmore Keithy Tapfumaneyi¹ and Gift Rupande²

1. Department of Library and Information Services, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

2. DPHIL Candidate, Department of Student Affairs, Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

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Abstract

The media is a powerful ideological tool which represents all relations in society including gender relations. The media has often portrayed gender relations in a skewed manner thereby perpetuating gender inequalities in society. The paper explores the concept of gender stereotypes and how the media through its cultural products expresses views about gender thereby promoting stereotypes. The media as the mirror of society has thus become a platform for gender biases and a battle ground for gender equality. It focuses on the need for gender neutral programming in the media, a paradigm shift from the sexist programming which pervades the media today. The paper also shows that media texts are replete with gender biases, leading to the symbolic annihilation of women. The paper argues that the media is a powerful ideological tool which can be modelled in ways that can address gender imbalances in society. The paper advocates for the enactment of media policies that will compel the media to portray gender relations in non discriminatory ways. The paper also explores challenges that may hinder the media from producing and publishing gender sensitive cultural products. The paper also suggests solutions to addressing those challenges.

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Introduction

The media is a powerful ideological tool which represents all relations in society including gender relations. The media has often portrayed gender relations in a skewed manner thereby perpetuating gender inequalities in society. Often women are represented negatively thereby promoting negative stereotypes about them. It becomes vital to explore the concept of gender stereotypes. The media through its various cultural products expresses views about gender which more often than not leads to the promotion of stereotypes. It is very important to consider the various factors such as the need for advertising revenue and the pressure to conform to social notions about gender which lead the media into purveying gender inequality thereby resulting in the social disempowerment of women. The media as the mirror of society has thus become a platform for gender biases and a battle ground for gender equality. Questions are abound on whether the current set up in terms of gender relations portrayal may be

circumvented, if so how may it be changed? Can media policies be used to avert and address gender stereotypes in the media and would these policies not stifle media freedom and curtail artistic or media freedom. Therefore an attempt to create a gender sensitive media presents a complex challenge.

Definition of Key Terms**Gender**

According to Kornblum and Julian (1992:p.286) gender maybe defined as when “women and men are socialized for their roles their culture has prescribed for them” Thus while sex refers to the biologically determined sex characteristics of male and female, gender focuses on the socio-cultural elements of male and female role expectations. Gender roles refer to sets of culturally defined character traits labelled as “masculine” and “feminine”. In other words, gender refers to socially learned behaviour and expectations that distinguish masculinity and femininity.

Gender roles

Gender roles are the mannerism and the different ways in which women and men act and behave. In this sense a role can be conceptualized as “a set of behavioural expectations associated with a particular position in a group” (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984:p.67). It is imperative to note and appreciate that these expectations will generally be held by members of both genders. Gender roles and expectations are not unyielding and static but rather mutate over time though the changes are usually slow and marginal.

Gender equality

According to May (2002) gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and benefit equally from the result. Attaining gender equality requires recognition that current social, economic, cultural and political systems are gendered.

Gender stereotypes

The term “stereotype” was derived from the Greek word “stereos” meaning “solid, firm” and “tupos” meaning “blow, impression, engraved mark “hence” solid impression which is deemed unchangeable. Stereotypes are over generalised beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social groups or categories. Gender stereotypes vary on four dimensions: traits, role behaviors, physical characteristics, and occupations. (Gandari, Chaminuka, and Mafumbate, 2010)

Femininity

According to Macdonald (1995) femininity is “acquired and reproduced through socialisation and the development of self concept” Women are expected to be emotionally expressive, dependant, passive, cooperative, warm and accepting a subordinate status in marriage and employment. Competitiveness, violence and anger are attributes which are largely regarded as being unfeminine and not tolerated as female behaviour (Gillian, 1982)

Behavioural expectations attributed to gender and causes of gender inequality

There are many behavioural expectations that have come to be expected and allocated to genders (Brooks-Gunn and Mathews, 1979:p.19-20). For instance females are characterised as being emotional, nurturing, tender, sympathetic and affectionate amongst many other things. While males are expected to be competitive, assertive, tough, self-reliant, unemotional, aggressive and dominant (Kornblum and Julian, 1992:p.288) Gender

differences are the result of natural forces in biology but not as a result of background. So the roles of women and men in the society depend on biological differences between the sexes. However, the explanation of gender differences should not only be interpreted from biology in the form of hormones and chromosomes, but also should be viewed from the perspectives social norms, values and culture which require and expect men and women to behave in different ways. The socio-cultural norms and values are also called stereotypes and are more influential in determining gender imbalances than biology.

At this juncture it might be important to reflect on a number of questions like “Why do individuals desire to conform to societal set gender requirements and norms? And why is it necessary for individuals to justify and accept gender roles and expectations?” It is important to note that as members of a society people are subjected to normative pressure from birth. Individuals have to follow a set of certain rules and justify society’s expectations. Individuals also experience informational pressure in the form of mass media which is characterised by the information explosion of this era.

Society requires not only individual socialisation into traditional gender roles within the family, but also the promotion and support of these traditional roles by other social institutions such as the media, religion and education. Culture also contributes as a factor by giving rules about social norms and behaviour. One’s society and culture validates gender roles and stereotyping encouraging people to fit in the dominant culture. Gender role socialisation is one aspect which hands men a script, which they learn to follow closely. In a given culture’s concept of socialisation, masculinity procedures are a script that prescribes for men certain ways they are to think, feel and behave as males and anything else is viewed as “feminine” and unacceptable.

Gender behaviour is first learnt through primary or basic socialisation within the family and is reinforced later in practically every sphere of social life and particularly at school, work and the media. Socialisation refers to the various ways in which a child learns to act in a manner acceptable to a given society. Gender socialisation is part of this process. Since birth culture inculcates in us what it means to be a boy or a girl. From the most basic and intrinsic things like the colour of clothes to the toys, these are messages sent to individuals at a very young age. Thus, before individuals decide what is right and what is wrong they try to find out what is right in other people’s opinions that is societal views on gender. People consider that they are behaving in a

right way when they behave the same way as others. The strong influence of gender norms on individual's behaviour can be said to be two pronged that is the result of the combination of informational pressure and normative pressure. Gender stereotypes tend to "simplify" our life and reduce the number of apprehension processes. During childhood individuals realise this and learn to adopt stereotypes without scrutiny and without making any effort to alter and modify them to suit their own personal realities. So gender stereotypes tend to limit the development of a complete human personality that is unique to individuals thereby leading to social inequality.

Representation of gender stereotypes in the media.

It is very pervasive for mass media practitioners to use stereotypical terminology that has been traditionally ascribed to males and females in the production of media text such as films, news reports and advertisements. Often the use of the gender stereotypical descriptors is unconscious as their use is rather inherent in individuals as these would have been assimilated during the socialization process when primary language acquisition took place. However, it takes a deliberate effort for authors and media practitioners to use descriptive terms for the gender that the term traditionally has not been applied to. When a descriptive term is applied to the gender it has not traditionally been attached to, the audience's interpretation of the message becomes different. For instance the picture you would make of an "aggressive man" is different from that of an "aggressive woman". The likely images of an "aggressive man" might be an innovative entrepreneur who aspires to achieve in a very harsh business environment whereas an "aggressive woman" one might imagine a very quarrelsome woman shouting and screaming and throwing punches and kicks with little success in the process.

Research into representations of women in the media has shifted in emphasis from content analysis to semiotic interpretation that is the 'decoding' of signs, images, language and style. In relation to gender and the media, content analysis simply counts or quantifies the number of a given sex portrayed in a particular category, such as domestic or "boss". Tuchman (1978) reviewed gender content analysis across a range of media in "Hearth and Home: Images of women in the media" The survey showed that women were only portrayed in two significant roles that is the domestic and the sexual. In contrast males appeared prominently in spheres of employment, family, politics and other areas of social life. Clearly the media was presenting men as

dominant and women as subordinate a position which they appeared to accept submissively and passively. Tuchman (1978), argues that symbolic annihilation of women in the media occurs through their absence, condemnation or trivialisation. They are trivialised by being presented as mainly interested in romance or by appearing as sex objects or domestic workers.

Gender roles and expectations are not confined to behaviours expected of all sexes but also extend to incorporate specific occupations as well. The attachment of particular professions to gender is purveyed in the mass media in the form of books, films and advertisements. Most cultures often prescribe occupations as being gender specific and the media often mirror these societal expectations. It has been discovered that career expectations tend to be influenced by sex role stereotypes which are reinforced by society. (Brooks-Gunn and Mathews, 1979: p.242). Individuals are chosen to feature in particular character roles based on socio-cultural notions of gender roles. It is rare to see women as structural engineers, mechanics or doctors in the media but such roles are often portrayed by male characters. Inculcating a belief that such occupations are a preserve and a domain for man. Most scholars have argued that such representations in media text have led to the symbolic annihilation of women through their portrayal in simplistic roles such as housewives and as being weak and vulnerable.

The mass media mediated messages have played an increasingly pivotal role in defining gender that is what it entails to be male or female in terms of the physical image people have of themselves (Mulvaney, 1994: p.3). The media through the advertising industry courtesy of the incessant themes on beauty, exercising and dieting have sought to define what women and men should look like. After having been exposed to a myriad of media messages over the years it is clear most media audiences can fathom and "realise" that the "ideal" body structure for both males and females is a tall and slender one. Women, it is envisaged should have narrow waists, long slender legs and flowing hair while men should have broad shoulder, flat stomach which are considered to be sexually appealing. The simple glaring fact that very few people conform to these "ideals" and that such images are largely as a result of computer editing and plastic surgery is lost to the audience and the producers of the media. Consequently most audiences strive for this dream ideal image.

There are those who argue that the images of beauty portrayed in the mass media for women and men are race bound, with features of white men and women

being celebrated as the universal norm for beauty. Black Africans can identify this to be so since they do not have naturally flowing hair but have kinky hair. The symbol shown by the media of what a man or woman looks like is problematic. Speller (1998:p.70) notes “that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Beauty is only skin deep. But who is the beholder? and whose skin can be beautiful? They are different facets to define gender; there are socio-cultural roles and behaviours that are ascribed by society, occupations and racial elements involved.

The media is usually regarded as an authentic source of information and knowledge and is essential in the social construction process. Despite the assertions of fairness, balance, accuracy and truth-telling by the media, the end product is always a construction or representation of reality from particular standpoints. All images and messages are carefully crafted with the intention of sending specific ideas, thereby making the perception that ‘the media tells the absolute and objective truth’ - a fallacy. The views and ideas of the powerful people who have access to and control of the media are included and normalised in the media, while other views are excluded and consistently absent - these are called ‘biases.’ Biases can occur in terms of race, age, class and gender. The ‘powerful and privileged people’ who include media owners, advertisers, politicians, media managers, media executives and editors are predominantly older, middle class, (sometimes white) males. The media content reflects economic, political and ‘masculinist vision of the world and what is regarded as important’ (Gallagher, 2002:p. 13). As already noted the type of masculinity presented as the norm is that of elite men. Gadzekpo (2009:p. 74) notes that in general there are very few female media owners in the world, but the situation is worse in Africa. This means that women have limited opportunities of representing themselves in the media hence they are often inappropriately represented in the male dominated media.

An overview of gender representation in the African Media.

According to Ake (1996) and Ndlela (2003) most countries in Africa inherited and sustained sexist and undemocratic broadcasting structures that were set up by colonial governments. Although the stations accepted advertising revenue, control and ownership of these facilities remained firmly in the hands of the state. In the context of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), at independence the ZBC was placed under the administration of the Ministry of

Information, while the board and management was made up of ruling party appointees. The private press just after 1980, particularly in context of Zimbabwe was dominated by white private capital who also controlled the economy (Chari 2006).

In Africa, particularly during the era before the 1990s (liberalisation of the media industry), Gadzekpo (2009:p. 73) notes that the coverage of women’s issues were often confined to the first ladies’ projects and pronouncements that got reported, with few or no contending perspectives either from the individual women who may have been the subjects of the news, or from gender groups, activists or scholars. In a report titled ‘*The Glass Ceiling and beyond – the status of women and diversity in the South African news media*’ by the South African National Editors’ Forum the majority of decision makers overseeing production routines in South African media houses were discovered to be men, with women occupying less influential positions. In a 2008 report on ‘*Gender Equality in the Media in Eastern Africa*’ by the East Africa Journalists Association (EAJA), only ‘3% of the total number of women journalists in nine East African countries sit at the decision making organs of their media institutions’. In addition the chances for advances of women to managerial and editor positions is very slim. This means that women have limited control over policy on content production in newsrooms.

Media monitoring reports of the news media at the global, Southern and East African levels show that in newsrooms, women journalists are generally assigned to ‘soft’ issues like beauty, health and other social events while men are given ‘hard’ news issues which include politics and the economy. In relation to news content, men are more likely to feature as news sources compared to women. The voice of authority provided by middle aged, professional men usually supports the existing power structures in society. This is regardless of the fact that women make up the majority of media consumers, little attention is paid to what they would be interested in knowing but more on what the male dominated media think they should know. (‘My Views on the News!’ study by Gender Links).

This is in contrast to advertising where, Lowe Morna & Ndlovu (2007) noted that women are more likely to feature in advertisements than in news. It is important to note that when women appear in the media that is in the news and advertising, women are stereotypically presented as sex objects, beauty objects, contestants, victims, sex workers and

responsible homemakers. The 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project showed that stories are more likely to reinforce than to challenge stereotypes about gender.

On the surface, advertisements sell products; a deeper analysis however would reveal that advertisements also sell worldviews and concepts of success, beauty, elegance, love and sexuality, creating not only a mass culture but also certain stereotypes. The advertising industry has for long thrived on normalising ideas of how gender should be portrayed. Female audiences are perpetually made to feel a combination emotions; inadequacy, guilt and admiration of the 'other' (flawless young, thin, beautiful) women in advertisements. In other parts of the world, this constricted view of the 'perfect' woman portrayed in advertisements exacerbates problems like anorexia in teenage girls.

Negative stereotypes abound in other media templates such as news, opinion and feature genres. In advertising, men are mostly stereotypically depicted as strong, muscular and virile. Increasingly, these stereotypes about men also fuel feelings of inadequacy in men. Writing in the context of the Nigerian home video films and the portrayal of women, Okunna (1996) observes that the images of women are stereotypical in nature and are likely to negatively influence the perception of among many viewers, the female audiences.

Stereotyping reduces complex situations and people into simplistic, easily-recognised, memorable categories and conforming to societal expectations. Although there have been attempts to justify using stereotypes in news for instance, stereotypes are perceived as being handy in light of tight time deadlines in news production. However, any form of stereotyping is dangerous as it stimulates prejudice and inequality justifying the position of those in authority. In most instances women have continued to bear the burden of negative stereotypes especially in the African media.

Media Monitoring Africa observed that, on a daily basis, issues concerning the rights of women are rarely covered except towards significant days like Women's Day. In everyday reporting, women are more likely to make the headlines when they deviate from the expected societal norms of being the 'super mothers' and 'patient wives'. Media Monitoring Africa flags some of the following headlines as illustrations: "*Wife kills husband over R180*" (The Daily Sun 16 January 2007, p.2), "*Family murders*

highlight our fraying social fabric" (Sunday Times 14 January 2007, p 25).

Some categories of women get less attention from the media, for example elderly women, women with disabilities and women with different sexual orientations. The nature of the media's stereotypical representations of women is double edged as the problem is on how women are portrayed and what the media is not showing about women. In addition to media house cultures and media managers who have defined the practice of journalism from a male perspective and are contributing to gender-biased reporting, the journalists' preconceived gender prejudices also contribute to this distorted reporting.

Journalism training institutions on the continent have also been taken to task by activists for their gender skewed curricula that do not cover issues of gender sensitive reporting. Writing on journalism curricula in general in post-colonial Africa, Domatob (1998) argues that they were inherited from the colonial era. These curricula often taught in European languages (French, Portuguese and English) cover issues based on Western experiences. Musa (2009:p.35) suggests that the replications of curricula misguidedly adopted strait jacketed and unmodified from Western universities, as well as the training of many African scholars in the field of communication and media studies, were major factors in the reproduction of some conservative scholarship in communication and media studies.

Thus, Gadzekpo (2009:p. 78) postulates that, Gender and media courses that are still missing in a lot of African mass media schools and departments and in gender/ women studies departments must be included. Gadzekpo (2009) adds that the curriculum of these courses can be collaboration between academics and non-academics. The processes of challenging the status quo and recreating a new 'reality' have been at the centre of the women's movement for a long time. Thus, in the context of women's marginalisation and victimhood image in the media, activism and research by women on media can be traced back to the United Nations first International Decade for Women (1975-1985).Gallagher (2002) however notes that the early years of international women's movement, media issues were regarded as secondary in importance to issues like poverty, education and health for women. Thus the 1995 United Nations official recognition (in Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action) of the importance of media monitoring as tool to scrutinise

the media to ensure that women's concerns are reflected in the media became a watershed point.

Causes of skewed representation of gender relations in the media.

It has often been said that the media is the mirror of society and the society itself holds certain views about gender relations and it is such views that are dominant in day to day living. The media often plays its part in reinforcing these ideas. Individuals are selected to play certain roles on television or in films based on societal notions of who should do what, thus the media in its portrayal of gender relations is under undue pressure to conform to societal expectations of gender relations hence the resultant stereotypes. The media is first and foremost a business entity which has to make a profit for its owners and shareholders. In doing so radio, television and other media agencies have to draw 'appropriate audiences' which they sell to advertisers who will be able to buy advertising space in the media in order to reach their target audience. There is a common belief that sex sales hence women are often objectified as sex symbols and objects in the media in order to draw large audiences who are later sold to advertisers for a profit. Hence the business philosophy of media agencies has often indirectly led to the promotion of gender stereotypes which influence positively advertising revenue.

Media organisations are at times not the originators of the cultural products that they disseminate. Thus often media agencies especially in the case of the media agencies of developing nations have to rely on cheaply produced film, news and other cultural products from global media agencies. In most such cases the media products come pre-packaged with gender stereotypes often depicting women as sex symbols and the over representation of masculine values. In addition to global media agencies media products, multi national advertising agencies also control media programming through sponsorship of certain adverts and programmes such as western soap operas and films such as the 'Young and the Restless', 'The Bold and The Beautiful' and 'The Days of Our Lives' just to mention a few. Such cultural products portray and promote certain gender stereotypes as well as western cultural ideals. The imbalance in media information and products flow is one of the major contributors of gender misrepresentations and cultural imperialism in third world media.

Defusing the media of gender stereotypes: Possible challenges & solutions

There are many constraints which have to be considered when thinking about ways in which the media may improve gender representations in its coverage. The factors to consider are money, public interest, technology, personnel and the formats of media presentation. For instance as media outlets chase the advertising money, they often become vulnerable to influence and as a rule advertisers are usually averse to shows that are different or which do not portray the normative themes of gender stereotypes such as those which portray women as sex objects or as being weak emotionally. Media outlets are also constrained in their capability to reject inappropriately packaged advertising material which portrays skewed gender relations.

Another point to ponder on is whether or not to give in to the public interest. The media is often faced with the predicament of continuing with skewed stereotypes about gender because the audience is interested in those representations. So in that sense in it may be argued that the media audience is responsible for the skewed gender stereotyped content that they consume from the media.

The issue of training of personnel comes into play whenever we think of the portrayal of gender relations. The issues of gender equality and the portrayal of gender issues in the media is a fairly new phenomena thus most journalist and those who work in the media need training on gender issues. This will enable those in the media to become gender sensitive as they do their work. Thus most of those who work in the media today are inappropriately trained to deal with gender issues hence the skewed portrayal of gender relations in the media.

The challenge that the media has is that of choosing between representations versus reality. There are those who call for reality based production of media images on gender issues. Thus if in essence the media and the society believes that women should be recognised for their beauty and sexuality as the major dominant views with few exceptions in which women excel in other areas of life such as business or sport. Then the media should focus on the dominant aspects despite negative gender stereotypes they represent as the projection of "reality" is the dominant principle. There are those who believe in the power of positive role models being used as agents of change in the society, thus in this instance the media over emphasizes certain gender representations which are in a minority in order to create a positive images about a certain gender. This might include the

dominant portrayal of women in successful roles of business, sport and in roles which portray women as being prominent in society so as to create role models through the media as a way of addressing the gender imbalances existent in most societies.

There is also the possibility of drafting and promulgating media policies that govern and regulate the content of the media pertaining to its representation of gender relations. The challenge with this approach however lies in its possible infringement on the freedom of the media and also the curtailing of artistic freedom despite the noble intentions of bring about equitable representation of gender relations in the media. Improving the representation of gender relations in the media is challenging in a number of ways as the media outlet as to find a balance between many competing interests such as financial issues, meeting public interest and the choice of representing gender relations ideals or “reality” as it is perceived by the majority of the society.

It still remains a challenge to change the mindsets of editors who have been socialised to not generally view women’s rights as important and to communicate these as important in the broader society (Lowe Morna 2002). This means therefore that transformation of attitudes and beliefs needs to happen at different levels of society. There is also need for the journalists and editors to understand the differences between sex and gender and the implications of stereotyping. Change can also take place if there is political will and commitment. This can practically translate into the development by and adherence to gender policies by media houses. In the EAJA report for instance, the lack of gender policies governing media operations in East Africa is conspicuous. The report also noted that there is an absence of editorial policies on the fair and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media content.

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) has led the way for media rights organisations by adopting a gender policy. Gender Links has ‘worked with a number of media houses in the region to develop gender policies. These include the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), a public broadcaster; the Times of Zambia (a state owned newspaper) and Kaya FM, a commercial radio station in South Africa.

Most of the gender and media NGO led initiatives are funded by donors with a few receiving funds from

other sources like government grants. The reliance on donor funding has in many instances negatively impacted on the sustainability of projects. When the funding cycle ends or when the donors pull out from funding projects, the projects usually fold. In a discussion convened by Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) at their 11th International Forum held in Cape Town in November 2008, NGOs noted that sometimes donors are reluctant to cover core costs of NGOs making it difficult to run the organisations. In the worst cases this has contributed to high staff turnover in NGOs. With a decreasing resource base, competition among NGOs for the scarce resources has increased.

Conclusion

The media plays a crucial role in society as it shapes ideology and influences people’s world views and how they perceive gender relations. The media is a major tool in socialisation, as it defines gender roles and stereotypes through the cultural products it disseminates. Sadly the media has been the one of the platforms upon which gender inequality has been purveyed. However this should no longer be the case as the same instrument that has been used to disempower maybe hammered into malleable forms that can be used to empower the disadvantaged females, who for long periods have been trivialized in their contribution to commerce, industry, sport, religion and other social spheres in general. Using the media in promoting gender sensitive media productions is key in improving social gender relations. The continued negative media representation of women in the media has continuously led to their symbolic annihilation. However, if the media is to change in its portrayal of women by projecting positive images of them in media productions it would ultimately lead to improved gender relations in society.

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