



*Nancy Kacungura is a Reporter for Africa on BBC TV, radio and online. She also recently won the Komla Pumor Award. There are a few female journalists that have such career breakthroughs in the media industry due to negative cultural norms and practices*

# **GENDER STEREOTYPES IMPEDING WOMEN'S ACCELERATION TO TOP MEDIA ECHELONS**

**ARISE REPORTER**



Women's representation in the media has been a focus of media scholars and several world conferences on women's rights. This is partially in recognition of the media's indispensable roles of informing, educating and changing people's mindsets on gender parity.

Media liberalisation and the women's rights movement in Uganda came in tandem at the beginning of the 1990's. Women's rights were subsequently enshrined in the 1995 Constitution and other pieces of legislation. Article 21 provides for equality in all spheres of life, including employment.

Despite a robust legal framework that curtails discrimination against women, their representation in the media is still at a dismal 30% for lower- and middle-ranking jobs. The percentage is even lower (at 3%) when it comes to senior managerial jobs in media houses.

Women in media houses mainly occupy low-ranking positions, as writers, reporters and freelancers. Although a few have broken the ranks and reached top management, these isolated incidents don't represent the entire situation in the media. In the vast media houses existing today, only 2 women appear to have called the heights. Ms Aggie Konde (picture on left), who is CEO at NTV Uganda and Ms Barbara Kaija the Editor-in-Chief at The New Vision.

A 1998 report by Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA) revealed that journalism was traditionally seen as a male job whereas women in the media are domestically stereotyped and assigned to leisure, beauty, fashion, education and health beats. Most of the shouting political stories and top investigations are assigned to men because of deep-seated biases against women.

One perspective not to forget is that women are increasingly participating in broadcast media rather than print media. This is mainly because men associate more with their voices and bodies than with what they have to offer in terms of substance. The increasing number of women on television, for instance, is often more a calculated business strategy than an approach to addressing gender imparity.

That the media mirrors society is an old journalistic maxim. This is true when it comes to women's representation in the media. Gender imbalances in the media partly reflect societal stereotypes against women. This perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, is reflective of women's position in society. In the Ugandan context, however, several engendered challenges impede women's representation in the media. Women have long been portrayed as sex objects at the work place. Anecdotal information reveals sexual harass-



ment at media houses, which affects the progression of female scribes.

Additionally, women in Uganda are increasingly performing double roles of being the breadwinners and at the same time the carers of their families. A female journalist will have to perform all these duties while a male journalist only concentrates on work. This partially explains why editors assign male reporters to late-night and far-away assignments.

Media policies have not been structured in a way that supports women's progression in the media. Furthermore, culture limits the extent to which women can go when sourcing stories. When sourcing for journalists to cover war, for instance, preference is given to men because they are perceived to be more up to the task.

Biases from editors and media owners also tend to discriminate against women and promote segregation and imbalanced promotion. Disparities in training limit women's chances to occupy management and leadership roles.

These biases and challenges often scare women away from practising journalism. In fact, research shows that at university level, the intake of women in journalism schools is often higher than that of men. However, as the course progresses towards specialisation, most women prefer public relations as compared to mainstream media. The patriarchal media as influenced by societal forces pushes women out of media houses.

It is sad to note that sometimes women's attitudes impede their progression in the media. Some successful female journalists have left active journalism for public relations, teaching and social work. Some have quit in order to

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become full-time mothers. The level of perseverance is still low when compared to women in other fields who face possibly similar challenges.

This can also be partially blamed on stereotypes and discrimination. Women who remain in the media often stagnate in the same positions for a long time. Studies have shown that promotion in the media is often not based on merit but rather on personal relationships and connections. Often, women who survive in the media have to sacrifice their personal integrity for career progression. The positions women hold in media houses cannot enable them to make decisions that are favourable to them.

Affirmative action requiring statutory

institutions to have at least 30% women's representation at board level has increased women's representation at the oversight level. Statutory media houses such as Uganda Broadcasting Corporation are required to ensure that at least 30% of their boards are women. This, however, has not trickled down to senior and middle management levels since affirmative action doesn't apply there.

Women media organisations such as Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA) should work with media houses to ensure that women are supported to work and stay in the media. Training opportunities and awards for women in the media should be pursued.

To improve women's representation in the media, media organisations must develop clear policies that promote fairness and transparency in the recruitment and promotion of journalists. Such policies should also address sexual harassment at the workplace.

The issue of gender-based biases is one that requires continuous education and sensitisation. Media houses, women's organisations and training institutions should work towards changing the mindset that women cannot be good journalists.

For women's representation in the media to be fully addressed, the question of ownership must be answered first. A male-dominated (read owned) media industry cannot effectively promote gender parity. This calls for holistic empowerment of women economically, socially and politically to own and run media houses. Affirmative action in the interim can be pursued.