

## **Reporting Africa for Africa and the World: The missing voices**

**By Rosemary Okello**

### **Abstract**

*This article reports on a recent conference held by The African Editors' Forum in South Africa where more than 150 editors gathered to discuss how the media has portrayed the continent to Africa and to the World. While the role of the media as articulated by the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development is critical for the continent's growth, this article argues that media has failed to portray African in its totality as women's voices continue to be excluded and marginalized.*

### **Keywords**

Media, women, gender, editor, Africa

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is one of the milestones in the continent's evolving political and developmental terrain. It provides a new threshold for performance and accountability for governments through peer reviewing process.

The role of the media in the new development model for Africa has been heralded as critical. It is argued and development possible is the free flow of information, without which people cannot make informed decisions.

Various theories of development have highlighted the media (electronic, print, internet and community media) as an essential change agent, which plays an important role in influencing the development of a society. If media is restricted, censored or hindered in any way, then citizens remain ignorant of events, their rights, their duty to the State and the role that they can play in development in their countries. Powered by awesome and fast changing technology coupled with vast reach, the media can be said to be one of the most powerful forces on earth today.

African editors at The African Editor's Forum (TAEF) conference in October 2005 re-examined their role as agents of development and expressed concern that often reporting from within Africa is presented from a western perspective. The conference's title "Reporting Africa for Africans and the World" reflected the desire to challenge this and to strengthen journalism on the continent.

Speaking about the need for critical reflection in African journalism at the opening of the conference, South African President, Thabo Mbeki said:

*[Critical Reporting] would enable us as Africans to understand one another better so that when we work together it is not on the basis of insufficient or bad information. This is all part of the process of openness and transparency.*

The opportunity to examine how the continent is reported was presented during the G8 Summit when British Prime Minister Tony Blair presented his African Commission report and again during the Millennium Development summit. But this spotlight exposed not only the tendency for news reports to reflect a “Western gaze” but also the absence of African women’s perspectives from the news.

The discussions at the TAEF conference mirrored this absence. Even though editors interrogated the construction of African news by exploring issues such as defining “African news”, ‘African perspectives on news’, the need to guard press freedom and “the state of technology research” in detail, issues of gender in defining African news were not addressed at all.

This is perplexing. How is it possible that discussion about a free press do not include discussions on gender? As Susan King of the Carnegie Corporation once commented:

*“We are talking about a free press. There is no free press if women have no role in that free press; we are half of the society” (cited in O’Brien, 2000).*

In his address to the TAEF conference United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, argued that the media has a vital role to play in raising awareness by providing a forum through which governments can be held accountable. “If we succeed, we will improve the opportunities for all human beings – and Africans in particular – to build better lives,” he said.

But as pointed out by media analyst Margaret Gallagher (2001), with media regulations becoming more and more difficult to enforce and media increasingly being driven by the quest for a huge financial profit, the commodification of women in media content is likely to intensify. How does this build better lives for African woman?

What editors at the TAEF conference did do however was to note that Africa’s story has not been fully reported and that the time has come to reflect the continent in its totality. This means taking into consideration issues of women’s representation – as subjects and as media practitioners. Reflecting Africa’s story in its totality implies the telling to women’s stories.

Despite the fact that women produce 80 percent of the continent’s agriculture and carry the burden of care for those infected and affected with HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS et al, 2004) roles one would assume would make them newsmakers, the media has to date paid very little attention to women’s stories.

African women, as their global counterparts, are limited as the sources of news and so often are simply missing in the media. Compared to men, they are less likely to feature in news stories and are less likely to be interviewed and asked for their opinion (Spears and Seydegrt, 2000)

The TAEF conference missed the opportunity to explore what “Africa’s story” is by excluding discussions of gender and women’s representation in African media. Unless African editors seriously engage with these challenges, women’s voices will continue to be missing and the worthy goal of reporting on Africa in its totality will not be achieved.

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