

Expert Group Meeting

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**This Revolution Must Be Televised:
Utilizing Media to Resist the Deliberate Symbolic
Annihilation of Feminist and Queer Narratives
That Challenge Dominant Discourses**

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN-Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

1. Introduction

The role that media storytelling plays on societal formation and cultural narratives is indisputable.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by 189 countries in 1995 declared the media one of 12 critical areas of concern for the advancement and empowerment of women. The Platform for Action calls for commitment to end sexism and sexist stereotyping in and through the media. Thus, the need to advance gender equality in and through the media and information and communications technology (ICT) has been at the core of gender and media advocacy work since the 1995 conference through its two strategic objectives:

- i. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.
- ii. Promote a balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media.¹

Our portrayals and the stories we tell help us see ourselves, and each other, in a different way. With our stories, we are able to build bridges, challenge the status quo, the existing power structures and shift social norms.

While standing on the podium at the United Nations advocating for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Beijing Platform for Action, I told my story of what it meant for me and those like me to face discrimination on the basis of my gender and my sexual orientation in Apartheid South Africa. Although the word ‘Sexual Orientation’ was not adopted, language around sexuality and sexual autonomy of women was included in Paragraph 96.

2. Challenges

Over three two days of Beijing +30 EGM we heard from experts describing the disheartening ways in which many of the gains that were achieved post-Beijing have been reversed.

The media landscape has provided a fertile ground for rolling back these achievements.

I have worked in the media space for over 40 decades, first as an actor and later as a filmmaker/tv director and have seen first-hand how media has been used as a mechanism for cultural transmission and social control.

Findings from the 2020 Gender and Media Progress Study (GMPS) show stagnation or regression in progress towards attaining gender equality in the media. The struggle towards reaching equality within media institutions is increasingly less about the numbers (as numbers edge towards

¹ Gender Links - Chap10 Baro2021 MEDIArev.

equality in most countries) of women entering the profession and more about the pervasiveness of sexism and misogyny – including cyber misogyny.²

The oversimplification and omission of realistic portrayals of women by the media have upheld the sexist idea that women are incapable of being multifaceted beings. This is true for queer and gender-diverse people.

Initially, the challenges we faced as women in the media were obvious and overt, but since Beijing, the discrimination and abuse have become more insidious.

We are seeing:

- i. Gender-bland sexism that sees women (and the gender diverse) still subliminally under-represented in sports.
- ii. An increase in the capture of resources meant for women, where cis-gendered heterosexual male producers are awarded major contracts to head women/queer productions and ultimately influence and shape narratives.
- iii. The outright erasure or the subtler deliberate symbolic annihilation of feminist and queer narratives, where women and the gender diverse continue to be under-represented and/or where representation is unrealistic and perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

“It is easy to write someone’s rights off as being less important than your own if the media you are exposed to on a daily basis tells you that they should be defined in terms that don’t accurately depict their abilities or realities.”

Stuart Hall – Media expert.

3. Recommendations

The false/under-representations of women and the gender diverse in the media have contributed to the neglect of women’s rights in society.

In order to begin to rectify this situation we need to:

- (a) Recognise, strategise and counter the Anti Gender movement and conservative right-wing agents at the forefront of the reversal of the gains made after Beijing. These agents have infiltrated every sector of society and governments, spending millions annually to utilise all the tools at their disposal, especially media, to undo the progress made by feminist

² Daniels, G. and Nyamweda T. 2018. Glass Ceiling: Women in South Africa media houses. Gender Links. Johannesburg.

and LGBTIQ+ movements. Feminist movements need the same efforts, funding and strategies to fight back the tide.

- (b) The media needs to be adequately used to articulate new policies that protect women and the gender diverse in institutions and civil society. Information, like some aspects of the Beijing Platform for Action, needs to be translated, simplified and made palatable to the general public.
- (c) There is little to no positive lesbian or gender-diverse representation in the African media. 30 years since Beijing and films depicting women who have sexual autonomy continue to be marginalised and banned. E.g. the film *Rafiki* (2018). Lesbian voices and narratives have been erased even in the archives of the United Nations (the full 5-minute video of the speech I made in 1995). Women's funds and diverse forms of philanthropy are urgently needed to prioritise positive and accurate representation of women, LGBTIQ+ and the gender diverse people in all media.
- (d) We need to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Technology and AI to counter the cyber bullying, silencing and reinforcing of negative stereotypes by misogynists.
- (e) Patriarchs continue to be producers and shapers of narratives. Men have the microphones and podcasts are now the biggest influencers of young men, and we are noting the increase in misogynistic and violent rhetoric. We need to fund large- and small-scale multimedia programs and projects that deliberately counter these misogynistic narratives.