



Mainstreaming Gender into Media: The African Union Backstage Priority

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Abstract

The chapter examines the ways in which mainstreaming gender into the media has been overlooked in the African Union (AU) gender equality frameworks. The chapter argues that in AU policies, gender in the media is effectively treated as second and last in importance to problems such as poverty, health, security, and education for women. Given the fact that the European Union (EU) has failed to implement gender mainstreaming strategies in the field of the media, and given the significant role the EU has played in global efforts as donor and source for policy inspiration, the chapter explores the possibility of a global failure in achieving gender equality in the media. The implications of such failure on social change and development are also considered.

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Introduction

The media, spelled out as 1 of the 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) adopted in 1995 at the Fourth International Conference on Women, have been referred to as “the most important yet challenging area of work for advancing gender equality” (Lowe Morna 2002, p. 1). Gender stereotypes, women limited decision-making roles in the media, and their unequal access to ICTs have been highlighted in the Declaration as key challenges to realizing equality of men and women in and through the media (BPfA 1995).

Despite being among the prominent figures in the adoption of the Declaration, the African Union (AU) has been slow to mainstream gender perspectives into the media. More than two decades later, integrating gender dimensions into the media has not yet received the weight it deserves. The nexus between gender and the media has been considered as an “add-on” in AU gender equality frameworks in which poverty, health, security, and education have assumed key priorities. At the same time, incorporating gender notions into the media is an unaccomplished mission in the European Union (EU) as well. Throughout the years, the EU has failed to implement gender mainstreaming strategies in the field of the media. Given the significant role the EU has played in global efforts as donor and source for policy inspiration, its failure in this context might be a potential indicator of a global disappointment in achieving gender equality in the media.

The chapter first discusses realities of problems in gender and the media. It then traces the historical development of AU gender equality instruments and explores the AU and the EU failures at keeping gender equality promises in general and mainstreaming gender into the media in particular. Finally, the exclusion of gender and the media issues from AU gender architecture is analyzed.

Gender and the Media: Why Should It Be an Area of Concern?

The media have been central to the construction of gender ideologies. They have a significant impact on the ways in which gender is defined and understood. The media do not only mirror reality but also shape public opinion and culture (Ross and Padovani 2017). Largely dependent on the ways in which they are used, the media can contribute to the promotion of gender equality. For instance, by using sensitive contents and language, and non-stereotypical representation of women and men, the media can enhance the equality of men and women in society (Williams 2000).

Further, the media have huge potential in advancing and empowering women by enabling them to participate and to be heard in the process of development and transformation (Bhagwan-Rolls 2011).

However, the media have been mostly criticized for standing on the way of gender equality (Lowe Morna 2002; Sarikakis and Nguyen 2009; Byerly 2014; Ross 2014a, b). Several studies have shown the problem of media's gender-based stereotyping, women's limited roles in media decision-making, and women's unequal access to ICTs (Lowe Morna 2002; Byerly 2014; Collado 2014; Grizzle 2014; Kareithi 2014; Ross 2014a, b; GMMP 2015; Webb 2016). These studies have been documenting and analyzing the ways in which women have been systematically and systemically put in disadvantaged positions both in content and decision-making in the media industries for decades.

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), the most extensive and longest-running research advocacy initiative for gender equality in and through the news media conducted every 5 years since 1995, has been reporting the persistent invisibility of women as news subjects. According to its 2015 report, women make up only 24% of the persons read about, heard, or seen in newspaper, radio, and television news, exactly as they did in 2010 (GMMP 2015). That means that for every three males we hear or see or read about in the media, we see or hear or read about only one female. Besides, the report reveals that almost 48% of all the stories reinforce stereotypical representations of men and women. The same report reveals that in Africa women's relative presence in the news has increased in half a decade from 19% in 2010 to merely 22% in 2015 yet below the global average. Such unfair representation of women maintains the status quo, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality in everyday life (Ross and Padovani 2017).

Although underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in the media is a global challenge, it is more intensified in Africa where the problem is further reinforced by patriarchal tradition and social customs (Kareithi 2014). A paper prepared by Gender Links for the AU Specialized Technical Committee on Information and Communications (STC-IC) on "Media Portrayal of Women and Media Gender Gap in Africa" stresses out that the media in Africa persist underrepresenting and misrepresenting women and systematically silencing their voices through invisible "gender censorship" (Gender Links 2017). The paper further points out that despite the intensity of the trouble with gender and the media in the continent, most African countries lack legislation, policies, and a positive environment for promoting gender equality in the media.

Furthermore, with the advancement of electronic media such as the Internet and cable channels, media images and contents transcend the local (Zubair 2016). Hence, global media would mean global content in which images of women circulate in ways that are more readily accessible. These global imageries perpetuate the persistent stereotypical portrayal of women and men (Gallagher 2008). Gallagher (2008, p. 24) has noted that "the picture that emerges from many analyses of Internet content is of a masculinist rhetoric and a set of representations that are frequently sexualized and often sexist." Given the transcending nature of these platforms and

the lack of policies governing global contents, the struggle to have a fair and balanced representation of women can face even more difficult challenge.

The small number of women in media decision-making is another challenge in promoting gender equality in and through the media (Lowe Morna 2002; Byerly 2014; Ross 2014a, b; Byerly and Padovani 2017). It is assumed that an increased presence of women decision-making roles in the media is likely to make a difference to the stereotypical and portrayal of women (Byerly and Padovani 2017). If women had a greater access to decision-making in the media, they could contribute to more gender-sensitive content. Nevertheless, the number of women in media decision-making is strikingly small worldwide. The Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media in 2011 shows that women held only about a fourth of “the jobs in governance (i.e., boards of directors) globally” (Byerly 2014, p. 40). Similarly, the report reveals that women in sub-Saharan African media account for 28% of the board members, 24% of the top and 54% of the senior management positions, despite constituting 49% of the technical professional field (Gender Links 2017). Kareithi (2014, p. 335) argues that though the number of African women working in media decision-making has shown some improvement after the Beijing Platform, women in the African media “can only get as far as the men will let them.”

Women’s access to ICTs also raises concern as the digital divide increases and poses a problem for the development of equal information society (IT) (Collado 2014; Grizzle 2014; Webb 2016). Although the issue of women’s unequal access to ICTs was acknowledged in the BPfA, the subject was paid greater attention in the Beijing +5 review in 2000 (Gallagher 2011). In addition to ICT access, issues such as “infrastructure and content as well as the role of ICTs in the development of culture, and the impact of all these on women’s rights and gender equality” have become new concerns that needed to be addressed (Gallagher 2011, p. 454). Subsequently, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in two phases in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), recognizes the potential of ICT as a tool for promoting gender equality and women empowerment and the existing “gender divide.” The Geneva Declaration, the outcome of the first phase, affirms a commitment to ensuring women’s inclusion and full participation in the information society “on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes” and to “mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end” under para 12 (WSIS 2003). Again, in a 10-year review of the implementation of the WSIS principles (WSIS+10), the WSIS acknowledged the persisting “gender divide” and reaffirmed its commitment to narrow the gap (ITU 2014).

The “gender divide” has been a significant impediment to women’s full participation in development process and in their enjoyment of the benefits of new electronic contents and services. Even if women’s unequal access and use of ICTs is a worldwide problem, women in developing countries are considerably more affected by obstacles to the access and beneficial use of ICTs (Grizzle 2014). Gender Links in its paper for the AU-STC-IC highlights that African women, particularly rural women, consistently struggle with unequal access to ICTs due to “inadequate infrastructure, affordability and availability, language barriers, illiteracy and even discriminatory social norms capacity and skills relevant content” (Gender Links 2017, p. 9).

Overall, the relationship between gender and the media remains one of the major challenges in achieving gender equality globally. Yet, the progress to address the problem has been far too slight to make gender equality in the media a reality. Further, any considerable advancement “can even be considered relative since it varies according to the region of the world” (Lourenço 2016, p. 927).

African Union Gender Equality Frameworks

The AU, which replaced the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) at its inaugural meeting in Durban, South Africa, in 2002, has expressed its commitment to promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls in several of its legal instruments. Its commitment to gender equality can be traced to the 1948 UN Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which emphasized the enjoyment of rights and freedom without distinction of any sex (Martin 2013). Since its establishment, the AU has been working to narrow the social, political, and economic inequality of men and women in the continent (Joshua Omotosho 2015). Acknowledging the fact that gender equality is a fundamental human right, the organization has promised to ensure “the absence of discrimination on the basis of one’s sex in the allocation of resources or benefits or in access to services” (The African Union Gender Policy 2009, p. 28).

Historically, the legal mechanisms of the AU to fostering gender equality have been informed by the UN frameworks (Martin 2013). Prominent among international legal frameworks adopted by the AU, the then OAU, is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which is described as the “international bill of rights for women.” The AU was also among the significant institutions taking part in the UN conferences held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) and its Platform for Action, as well as conferences in the 1990s on population and development, human rights, social development and human settlements, and trade and poverty reduction strategies (Martin 2013).

Adhering to its commitment to fostering gender equality and women empowerment, the AU has adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the primary global framework for international development intended to reduce poverty and to empower women (Goal 3) by 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), another global mechanism aiming to end poverty by 2030 and to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls (Goal 5).

In line with the SDGs, the AU has set Agenda 2063, the continent’s 50-year strategic plan aiming to achieve an integrated, peaceful, and prosperous Africa for all. This framework, officially adopted by the AU Assembly in 2015, provides a new collective vision and road map to build a developed and united Africa based on shared values and a common destiny (The African Union Commission 2017). Agenda 2063 reaffirms fostering gender equality and acknowledges women’s contribution to Africa’s structural transformation and sustainable development (African Union Commission 2015).

Furthermore, in accordance with the UN gender equality mechanisms, the AU has formulated a number of gender equality instruments to accelerating gender equality and women empowerment. The first ever African Union Gender Policy was developed in 2009 with the proclaimed goal of setting up a clear vision and making commitments to guide the process of gender mainstreaming and women empowerment to influence policies, procedures, and practices which advance the achievement of gender equality, gender justice, nondiscrimination, and fundamental human rights in Africa (African Union Gender Policy 2009). Other key gender equality frameworks set by the AU include the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981), a significant instrument for the protection of human rights in Africa; the Protocol on the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), a legal framework; the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004), a non-binding commitment to the principles of gender equality; the Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, especially Women and Children (2006), a tool for combating human trafficking; and the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007), a key instrument for the promotion of gender balance and equality in the governance and development process. In addition, with the aim of accelerating the implementation of the gender equality policies, the AU has declared this decade, 2010–2020, the African Women's Decade.

More importantly, the AU has made a revolutionary decision on gender parity (50/50) taken at the Inaugural Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in July 2002. Standing by its decision, the AU elected five female and five male Commissioners during the Second Ordinary Session of the Assembly in 2003. In addition, the appointment of Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as Chairperson of the AU Commission, who became the first woman to lead the Commission from 2012 to 2017, further demonstrates AU effort to advancing gender equality principles.

Expanding the gender parity principle to other AU organs, AU Executive Council's formal decision in January 2016 has pledged to ensure that the voices of both women and men are equally represented in all AU organs. Accordingly, at least one of the two representatives from the five African regions in all AU organs shall be a woman (The African Union Commission 2017).

The AU has also played a significant role in promoting gender equality by pursuing its regional economic communities (RECs) representing Africa's sub-regions: the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) as well as key programs and instruments such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to adopt gender principles and declarations (Martin 2013; Joshua Omotosho 2015).

Again, the AU has made a considerable contribution to encouraging its Member States to adopt, ratify, implement, and domesticate international and regional treaties, conventions, and decisions on gender equality and has created platforms to bring a consensus on gender equality issues among the Member States (Winyi 2009).

To facilitate the implementation of the frameworks on gender equality, the AU has formed the Women and Gender Development Directorate in 2002 which is responsible to build the capacity for all AU organs, RECs, and Member States “to understand gender, develop skills for achieving gender mainstreaming targets and practices in all policy and programme processes and actions by 2020,” with the hope of closing the persisting gender gaps and delivering the promise of gender equality for African people (African Union Gender Policy 2009, p. 5).

The Directorate also organizes annual AU Gender pre-Summits in collaboration with other departments of the African Union Commission and development partners. The pre-Summits are held before each AU summit to update and assess progress toward gender equality and women empowerment. The outcome of the discussion serves as a key informant to the AU Summit of Heads of State and Government deliberation on gender equality issues (González 2017). The pre-Summits, “initially conceived as civil society consultation platforms. . . now draw participation from the African ministers responsible for gender and women’s affairs, RECs, AU organs, AUC departments, the private sector, UN agencies and development partners” (González 2017, p. 20).

Over the years, the AU has been a pivotal organ in the promotion of gender equality in Africa. It has contributed to the advancement of “the gender agenda by recognizing the importance of women’s contributions to development, reducing maternal mortality and promoting basic education for girls” (González 2017, p. 12). Through its gender equality frameworks, the AU has “enabled the member states and the RECs to advance their own legal, administrative and institutional frameworks to make progress on women’s rights and gender equality” (Martin 2013, p. 16). Moreover, AU gender equality instruments have put gender mainstreaming at the center of AU policy-making (González 2017). Consequently, “most instruments adopted by the AU since 2003 make provision for gender equality and women’s participation” (Martin 2013, p. 16). Nonetheless, it should be noted that implementation of these instruments has been hampered due to the persisting lack of political will and shortage of resources (Martin 2013).

In the journey of the AU to gender equality, the EU has been a key development partner. It has been a major source of donor and a role model on “the institutionalization of gender equality and on strategies for gender mainstreaming” (Martin 2013, p. 18). Though “primarily for geopolitical and economic reasons,” the development cooperation with Africa entered the EU agenda since its establishment in 1957 (Debusscher and van der Vleuten 2012, p. 319). Gradually, their relationship took a different shape to bilateral cooperation as former colonies gained their independence. In their transformed partnership, promoting gender equality has taken a key place. The first references to women’s rights in EU development cooperation with the sub-Saharan African region are found in the Third Lomé Convention signed in

1984 with 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (ACP) (Debusscher and van der Vleuten 2012, p. 319). The issue of “Integrating Gender Issues in Development Cooperation” is also reflected in subsequent EU development policies such as the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty (Article 3(2)) and the 2005 EU Consensus on Development (Article 19) (Martin 2013). Advancing gender equality has been also one of the principles enshrined in the 2007 Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) (JAES 2007) and central to EU development aid programs. In the study of the programming of EU development cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa for the period 2002–2013, Debusscher and van der Vleuten (2012, p. 327) find out that “gender is increasingly present in all budgetary sectors of the EU–sub-Saharan African development aid.” Notably, the focus placed on the principles of gender equality in EU financial and technical support strategies for the AU has been crucial in enhancing the continent’s progress toward gender equality.

Achieving Gender Equality in the AU and the EU: Unfinished Job

Since the BPfA, the AU and the EU, at either end of the spectra of power and economy, have made considerable improvement in promoting gender equality in their respective regions. Notwithstanding the huge difference in the extent of their achievements, their progress toward the actual equality of men and women has been slower than hoped. Particularly, despite reaffirming commitments to promoting gender equality in the media, the mission appears to be an unaccomplished one in both supranational entities.

The AU Unmet Promises

Gender inequality is a defining challenge for Africa. Although the AU has exerted considerable effort in tackling gender inequality, the path of progress has been slow and inconsistent for many African counties (UNDP 2016). Winyi (2009) has expressed the overall progress toward gender equality in Africa since the BPfA, as “regrettably slow and with a wide gap between commitments and actual action still persistent.” Significant gaps between men’s and women’s opportunities remain severe obstacle to structural economic and social change. According to the Africa Human Development Report 2016, gender inequality is costing sub-Saharan Africa on average 95 billion dollars a year, peaking at 105 billion dollars in 2014, 6% of the region’s GDP, jeopardizing the continent’s efforts for inclusive human development and economic growth (UNDP 2016).

In narrowing the persisting gender inequality, the AU tends to place greater focus on the adoption of equality instruments than ensuring the practicability of them among Member States. Notably, the AU has taken more actions in the form of policy formulation and the development of frameworks for implementation (Winyi 2009). Although ratification of policies can help “strengthen the work of national mechanisms by creating additional accountability, harmonizing approaches across

countries and circumventing resistance and challenges to gender equality at the national level,” more important is their domestication and implementation (Martin 2013, p. 24).

When it comes to follow-up measures, the AU lacks effective evaluation and monitoring mechanisms both at national and regional levels. The Member States, regardless of their differences in government structures and political choices, have in common inadequate tracking and monitoring systems (Martin 2013). Several Member States have failed to submit progress reports on their implementation of gender mainstreaming. For instance, although Member States were required to send in periodic reports on their implementation of rights enshrined in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, only three Member States have reported their progress. Again, only 13 Member States have submitted regular annual reporting on the Solemn Declaration of Gender Equality in Africa for the tenth annual report in June 2015 (Abdulmelik 2016).

More importantly, mainstreaming gender into the media is a promise greatly overlooked in AU policies and practices. The subject appears to gain little attention in AU policies toward gender equality and women empowerment (see section “[Gender and the Media in AU Gender Architecture](#)”). In fact, the nexus between gender and the media has gained a far better consideration in the RECs protocols like the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) and the Supplementary Act Relating to Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region (2015). These two documents cover the major challenges in gender and the media, gender stereotyping in media content, professional discrimination in the media industries, and unequal access to new ICTs, and propose specific action plans (SADC 2008; ECOWAS 2015).

At large, the AU progress to promoting gender equality in media has been painfully slow. According to “the Twenty-Year Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) +20: African Regional” report, only 22 Member States, less than half of the 51 countries which submitted progress reports, have shown significant advancement in formulating legal frameworks and strategies to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in the media (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2014). Progress toward the implementation of the legal instruments, however, is not indicated. In addition, any effort by the AU in pursuing Member States to fostering gender equality in the media is invisible in the report. Yet, following this review, the AU has reaffirmed its commitment to addressing the problem with gender and the media in the Addis Ababa Declaration on Accelerating the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (2014).

Moreover, initiatives and dialogues on gender and the media supported by the AU are far too few and focus on gender and the media with relation to peace and security. A typical example is the “Network of Reporters on Women, Peace and Security” launched by AU Commission and UN Women in 2016. This initiative, taking the media as key partners in advancing women and peace and security agenda, seeks to empower journalists to respect the dignity of women and recognize women’s contributions to social cohesion and lasting peace in their communities. The network has further published a handbook on “Practicing Gender-Responsive Reporting in

Conflict Affected Countries in Africa” in July 2017. Regardless of the potential contribution of the network to a fair representation of women in the media at times of conflict, its scope is limited to women’s role in peace and security matters and ignores their complex challenges in a day-to-day reality. More similar initiatives on gender and the media that address women in social, political, and economic contexts are missing. This could restrict the role of the media in effecting a positive social change.

The EU Unmet Promises

The EU has played a pivotal part in the advancement of international agenda such as gender equality, climate change, and peace and security. To this end, it has established and funded a number of development programs in Africa and other developing regions. Given the key role the EU has played in global efforts to social change and development, its progress as well as its failure to achieving gender equality as a whole and mainstreaming gender into the media in particular could have significant impact on a global success on the matter.

In addition, in view of the growing trend toward globalization of media and communication, and considering the EU greater contribution to global media contents, the ways in which gender equality is addressed in the European media would be relevant beyond the region.

It is, therefore, with this consideration that EU unmet promises in the practicality of gender mainstreaming with specific emphasis on mainstreaming gender into the media are explored.

Although the EU has gained a much greater achievement in the advancement of gender equality and women empowerment with relation to the AU, it cannot be regarded as a perfect reference point of success, particularly in implementing gender mainstreaming in its policies and practices (Tomlinson 2011; O’Connor 2014; Weiner and MacRae 2014). Tomlinson (2011, p. 3755) argues that “despite strong statements on the need to eliminate gender inequality, the EU’s progress in this area is contested.” The EU has regularly drafted a number of laws and strategic documents to promoting gender equality, albeit its accomplishment is slow and limited (Weiner and MacRae 2014). Weiner and MacRae (2014) further argue that gender equality is invisible in EU policies, and a “revolutionary change” is far from attainable. Similarly, O’Connor (2014, p. 72) contends that “much of the progress in the EU and elsewhere has been strong at the discursive level in terms of gender justice commitments, but relatively weak in outcome.” According to the 2017 Gender Equality Index, gender gaps persist in many areas and in the labor market where women are still overrepresented in lower paid sectors and underrepresented in decision-making positions. With an average score of 66.2 for gender equality, the EU still has a long way to go to bring a fundamental social change in terms of gender parity (Barbier et al. 2017).

Mainly, the EU has come short in ensuring the practicability of gender mainstreaming (Bretherton 2001; Tomlinson 2011; O'Connor 2014; Weiner and MacRae 2014). As Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2000, p. 434) note, the concept of gender mainstreaming is “potentially revolutionary” which calls for the incorporation of gender perspectives into all EU policies. The European Commission (EC), which adopted a formal commitment to gender mainstreaming in 1996, defines the concept as:

The systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men in all policies and with a view to promoting equality between women and men and mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account, at the planning stage, their effects on the respective situation of women and men, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. (Commission of the European Communities 1996, p. 2)

In practice, gender mainstreaming is, however, an extremely demanding approach which needs the adoption of gender dimensions by all central actors in the policy process (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000; Bretherton 2001). The success of gender mainstreaming would require internalizing its principles and practices “in all aspects, and at all levels, of EU policy process” (Bretherton 2001, p. 61).

Hence, institutionalizing the principles of gender mainstreaming in all EU policies and practices has become a challenging task. Discussing the implementation of gender mainstreaming, Weiner and MacRae (2014, p. 2) note that although there are “small, often hard-won” accomplishments, they are usually “outnumbered by several instances which block out gender mainstreaming partially or completely from EU policies.” To illustrate the futile struggle of the EU in integrating gender into its policies, particularly in implementing gender mainstreaming, Weiner and MacRae use the story of Sisyphus. In the story, Sisyphus, a character in *the Odyssey*, condemned by the gods, pushes vainly a massive rock uphill, yet to find the rock always rolling back to where he started. The authors argue that like Sisyphus’s rock, “rolling gender mainstreaming into EU policies either ends up rolling back out of policy, or never rolls in at all” (Weiner and MacRae 2014, p. 4). To this day, excluding gender aspects from many of EU policies mainly in the European Employment Strategy (EES) remains a challenge where “the gender equality goal has been instrumentally subordinated to other agendas” (Fagan and Rubery 2017, p. 7).

Above all, the EU has not succeeded in mainstreaming gender into the media. Although the nexus between gender and the media entered the EU agenda well before the BPfA, with the adoption of Council of Europe’s Recommendations on Equality of Men and Women and its Guidelines for Television Advertising in 1984 (Byerly and Padovani 2017), the overall progress to integrating gender perspectives into the media has been slow (Sarikakis and Nguyen 2009; Gallagher 2011; Byerly and Padovani 2017; Ross and Padovani 2017).

Following the BPfA, the EU has adopted a number of documents regarding gender equality in the media (Byerly and Padovani 2017), yet these policies lack gender-specific provisions on the conduct of the media (Sarikakis and Nguyen 2009; Byerly and Padovani 2017). Almost a decade ago, Sarikakis and Nguyen (2009)

have highlighted the ways in which EU media policy lacked explicit provisions on fair representation of women. As such, in the most significant legal instrument for the European audiovisual (AV) sector, the Television without Frontiers Directive (TVWF), “there was a timid reference that advertisements may not infringe human dignity or contain discrimination on grounds of sex” (p. 209). The authors argue that such general allusion had limited the directive legal impact.

Similarly, Gallagher (2011) has discussed the lack of specificity in other EU media policies. She explains that in two recommendations adopted by the Council of Europe in 2007 on media pluralism, a general phrase “Due attention should also be paid to gender equality issues” is included in each case at the end of a paragraph. In addition, a similar phrase, “Gender-related issues should also be mainstreamed with regard to these services,” is found in the Political Declaration adopted at the first Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services (2009). However, she argues that there is “no indication of what these issues are, how they could be ‘mainstreamed’ or even how they relate to the substance of the policy documents” (p. 456).

The absence of explicit provisions to gender equality in the media is also observed in the recent EU ICT strategy known as the Digital Agenda for Europe which makes a general reference to the gender implications of digital transformations (Byerly and Padovani 2017). Byerly and Padovani contend that “the framing of gender equality in the digital context seems to be very narrow” and emphasizes the economic implications of involving women in ICTs (p. 15). Regarding the limited scope of the strategy, Padovani (2016) notes “more general concerns with gender social justice, persistent discrimination, and the gender implications of the unequal power relations in an evolving media environment are missing, demonstrating that gender mainstreaming in this domain is still unfinished job” (in Byerly and Padovani 2017, p. 15).

Furthermore, EU media policy provisions for gender equality in media content has been of “a ‘soft’ nature, referring to the media’s ‘contribution’ to non-sexist portrayal and not to their obligation” (Sarikakis and Nguyen 2009, p. 209). On the persistence of this trend, Byerly and Padovani (2017, p. 18) state that “the ‘soft’ nature of policy provisions can still be found in the reference to codes of conduct and self-regulation as the main means through which the media sector can integrate normative guidelines in their operation, rather than legislation.”

Notably, as Gallagher (2011, p. 456) argues “conflict within EU institutions between gender equality policy and media policy is clear.” Nonetheless, reconciling the two seems to be the EU unaccomplished mission. As a whole, the media sector has remained reluctant to change (Ross and Padovani 2017).

Gender and the Media in AU Gender Architecture

The AU has made a commitment to address obstacles to gender equality in and through the media with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration. The Platform has spelled out two strategic objectives (Section J) to tackle the problem (BPfA 1995):

- To increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication
- To promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media

To this end, the Platform calls both governments and international organizations to facilitate the implementation of these strategies to the extent it is consistent with freedom of expression. In what follows, to what degree the BPfA strategic objectives and action plans are translated into AU gender architecture is discussed.

The AU gender architecture encapsulates the Union aspirations of gender equality and is comprised of six pillars (Martin 2013):

1. The Consecutive Act of the AU – the constitutional framework
2. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa – the legal framework
3. The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa – the reporting framework
4. The African Union Gender Policy – the policy framework
5. The African Women’s Decade – the implementation framework
6. The Fund for African Women – the financial mechanism

The Constitutive Act of the AU, adopted in 2000, sets out the framework under which the AU is to conduct itself (African Union 2000). Under Article 4(I), the Act recognizes the “promotion of gender equality” as one of its principles. Based on this reference to gender equality, Martin (2013, p. 11) argues that “creating the necessary mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality is therefore an important aim of the AU.” Nevertheless, the Constitutive Act lacks specific provisions on gender mainstreaming issues and strategies as it has mentioned the principle of gender equality very briefly. In fact, the terms “gender” and “women” are each mentioned once throughout the document. Although the Act “represents a significant departure from the 1963 OAU Charter-in particular by including the ‘promotion of gender equality’ as one of its foundational principles,” it excludes a similar provision from its list of objectives and makes use of a gender-insensitive term – “chairman” (Viljoen 2009, p. 13). This elicited the adoption of the Protocol on Amendments to the Constitutive Act of the African Union on July 2003 in which the inclusion of the objective to “ensure the effective participation of women in decision-making particularly in the political, economic and socio-economic areas” and the substitution of the word “chairman” with “chairperson” were proposed (Viljoen 2009).

As the Act has not discussed gender issues in detail, no indications are found regarding mainstreaming gender into any sectors including the media.

The second key AU gender equality framework is the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol). This is the legal framework which requires Member States to integrate gender in legal and policy frameworks, strategies, programmes, and development activities. Winyi (2009) calls the protocol as “the first African instrument to explicitly articulate the rights of women in Africa.”

With regard to the treatment of gender and the media in this protocol, Article 12(b) calls for “the elimination of all stereotypes in textbooks, syllabuses and the media that perpetuate all forms of discrimination against women.” In addition, Article 13(m) urges States Parties to “take effective legislative and administrative measures to prevent the exploitation and abuse of women in advertising and pornography.” However, this phrase does not elaborate on what actions fall under “exploitation and abuse,” leaving the matter for open interpretation. In addition, the provisions address merely non-stereotypical portrayal of women yet fail to include other aspects of problems surrounding gender and the media. There is no any indication to women media decision-making roles or their unequal access to ICTs. Again, gender in the media receives insignificant consideration in the protocol compared to the focus given to gender in relation to issues like health, peace and security, marriage, justice, political and decision-making, education, economics and social welfare, food security, cultural context, and sustainable development, which are discussed in more comprehensive manner.

Talking about the little attention that women and communications issues, in general, had received during the UN Decades (1975–1985) and even until the 1990s, within both the UN system and the international women’s movement, Gallagher (2011, p. 453) notes that communications issues were regarded “as secondary in importance to problems such as poverty, health, and education for women.” This problem persists in this protocol where gender with relation to peace and security, poverty, health, and education appears to be key priority, whereas gender in the media is considered as an afterthought.

The subsequent instrument is the 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa. It is a non-binding reporting framework committing Member States to report annually on their progress in gender mainstreaming.

This declaration acknowledges the existing digital divide between men and women in the continent and the role of ICTs in accelerating gender equality. Yet, no action plan to address the digital divide is mentioned. Further, women’s representation in media contents and decision-making roles is not indicated at all. In terms of major areas of concern where gender inequality needs to be addressed, like the previous protocol, this document spells out health, particularly HIV/AIDS, peace and security, child soldiers and abuse of girl children, gender-based violence, and property rights. Despite the declaration reference to the BPfA in informing its direction, gender inequality in and through the media is not among the declaration’s list of concerns.

Another key document in AU gender architecture is the AU Gender Policy which was approved in 2009 and adopted in 2010. The policy provides “the basis for the elimination of barriers to gender equality and fosters the reorientation of existing institutions” (Martin 2013, p. 14).

The Gender Policy recognizes the role of the media in accelerating gender equality and women empowerment. It identifies women’s equal access to ICTs as a key area of concern. It also puts “the participation of the media” under its rationale. The media are also identified as part of the institutional frameworks in the implementation of the policy.

However, although there is a phrase “Elimination of gender stereotypes, sexism and all forms of discrimination” under the policy rationale, no indication is made to “the media.” Moreover, with regard to the role of the media as part of institutional frameworks for the implementation of the Gender Policy, they are mainly considered as facilitators for mainstreaming gender into other sectors. Nonetheless, the policy fails to regard the media as sectors which would require the integration of gender dimensions themselves. Hence, while the Gender Policy identifies ten “key issue sectors” of development where gender needs to be mainstreamed into with the view to achieving gender equality and women empowerment, the media are not among them.

It may be argued that mainstreaming gender into the media may be encapsulated in one of the ten sectors, for instance, under “Social Affairs” or under “Science and Technology.” However, bearing in mind media’s huge potential in challenging gender inequality, and the recognition gender and the media gained in the Beijing Platform, mainstreaming gender into the media deserves much greater consideration.

The fifth pillar of the gender architecture is the African Women’s Decade which was launched in 2010 with the aim to accelerate the implementation of Dakar, Beijing, and AU Assembly decisions on gender equality and women empowerment. It is based on ten priority themes targeting to empower women across Africa through dual top-down and bottom-up approach which is inclusive of grassroots participation.

When it comes to the place of gender and the media among the ten African Women’s Decade themes, the framework appears to give no considerable thought to the subject. The only indication close to the issue is the phrase “contribution of Women Scientists and Information, Communication and Technology” under theme 4 – Education, Science and Technology. However, the reference is too general and vague to clearly show what needs to be addressed regarding women and ICTs. Such lack of clarity may undermine efforts taken to face up challenges in women’s unequal access to ICTs. This can be observed in the Mid-Term Status Update Report of the African Women’s Decade (2010–2015) in which only one country, Rwanda, has reported measures taken to promote women and girls’ access to ICTs.

Complementing the African Women’s Decade Road Map, the Fund for African Women was launched in 2010. This framework aims at providing financial support for African women development programs. It benefits women and development programs in African Union Member States, RECs, and African Civil Society Organizations. To enhance the implementation of the Women’s Decade, the Fund for African Women, each year, supports a minimum of 53 projects related to 1 theme from the 10 Decade themes identified by AU Ministers of Gender and Women’s Affairs.

As the projects supported by the Fund are selected among the ten themes of the Decade, the issue of gender in the media, which is excluded from the key themes, may find it hard to benefit from the Fund for African Women. This, in turn, could restrict the communicative space of initiatives on promoting gender equality in and through the media.

In general, the intersection of gender and the media is not a well thought through agenda in AU gender architecture where topics like health, peace and security, education, gender-based violence, property rights, economic, and justice have assumed key places. Except for some occasional references and recommendations on gender and the media, a genuine concern and concrete strategies are invisible. These provisions have failed to reflect the strategic objectives and action plans set in the BPfA.

The invisibility of the issue of gender and the media in these key official gender equality mechanisms of the AU could affect progress toward promoting gender equality in the African media and the potential role of the media in empowering African women since addressing gender inequality in and through the media is “clearly dependent on policy determinations” (Gallagher 2011, p. 452).

Conclusion

Much is happening but much remains to be done with regard to achieving gender equality in Africa. Despite the potential that exists for the media to accelerate this process, the AU has failed to embrace mainstreaming gender into the media as part of its mission. Promoting gender equality in the media has not been taken seriously within the broader policy framework to push forward on the equality agenda. The subject is considered as an “add-on” and treated second or last in importance to matters such as health, peace and security, education, and economic. For a continent with the highest maternal mortality rate, frequent armed conflicts, and extreme poverty, putting health, peace and security, and the economy as key areas of concern is an undisputable measure. However, given the pivotal role of the media as opinion shapers, there should still be a room left for fitting the agenda with the rest of AU priorities.

At the same time, mainstreaming gender into the media has also been the EU unfinished job. Despite being the AU major donor provider and a role model for designing and implementing gender equality mechanisms, the EU has lacked a best practice to share in this area. At large, the EU has been slow in making specific provisions to make gender equality in the media a reality. Although its effort to advance gender equality in and through the media started even before the BPfA, no substantial change is yet made in this context. This may demonstrate a troubling possibility of a global failure with regard to mainstreaming gender into the media which in turn can pose a serious threat to taking any meaningful steps to social change and development. When the media with their powerful influence on the public opinion regarding gender and gender equality and ICTs with their vital roles in empowering and advancing women remain gender insensitive, the status quo would be maintained, delaying the realization of gender equality.

To face up this challenge, the AU needs to set up strategies that address the problems in gender and the media. These strategies should provide clear and specific provisions on combatting unfair and stereotypical representation of men and women, women limited decision-making roles, and the gender digital divide. Here, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) and the Supplementary Act

Relating to Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region (2015) can serve as good reference points. More importantly, as developing policies alone could not bring a substantial change in promoting gender equality in the media, emphasis should be placed on their implementation and evaluation.

With regard to the EU, since the existing strategies and initiatives have been slow to fostering gender equality in the media, more specific policy interventions could still be needed. Further, to make gender equality in and through the media a global reality, the EU financial and technical support for the AU on promoting gender equality in the media could be elemental in advancing the progress.

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