WACC taking sides

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Women's human and communication rights[1]

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'Now we are seen as real human beings.' This was how village women in south eastern Kenya summed up their experience of running a community radio station. Asked about the impact of the radio station on their lives, they said, 'The status of women both at household and community levels has improved a lot. Men used to despise us, saying that there is nothing big that we can do. ... Now we are seen as real human beings'.[2]

These women's sense of achievement at being seen as 'real' human beings – a state that apparently they had not experienced previously – shows that there is a deep hole in any discussion of human rights that does not explicitly – and I stress, explicitly – acknowledge and elucidate the specific position of women within the human community. Analysis that claims to include both women and men in a general rights framework hides the deeply gendered division of power and rights within communities everywhere. The result is a disaster for women's human rights.

Those women in Kenya were fortunate. Through their community radio station they not only gained respect and entered public life within the village, but they found a way of speaking out about deeply degrading issues – rape, sexual assault, physical violence, alcoholism – that from childhood they had been taught to keep quiet about and to accept. For millions of women around the world this never happens. They live out their lives not as 'real' human beings, but in a state of fear and silence that arises specifically from the fact of having been born female.

Pre-natal sex selection, female infanticide, so-called 'honour killings', femicide – these are among the most brutal means of ensuring that women are never heard, indeed sometimes never born. They are all forms of gender-based violence against women, defined in 1992 by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately.'[3]

In 1993 the parallel term 'gender-based censorship' was coined by the Filipina feminist writer, journalist and human rights activist Ninotchka Rosca.[4] At first glance, the expression 'gender-based censorship' may seem an exaggerated or emotive way of describing how women's communication rights are curtailed. But if we think of it in terms of the suppression of women's voices *because* they are women, or in ways that affect women *disproportionately*, echoing the CEDAW definition, it helps us to analyse women's invisibility – or sometimes their hyper- visibility – in communication processes, not as something particular to this or that media system or media genre, but as a quite fundamental aspect of social, economic and political relations.

Of course censorship exists in different forms in all States. And women – whether as citizens or as journalists – who criticise aspects of state politics, corruption and so on can be silenced in the same ways used to silence men who speak out – though, in practice, even these forms of censorship may be affected by gender. For instance, Article 19 has documented that rape, gang-rape, and sexual smear campaigns are common forms of punishment used against women activists and journalists.[5]

But gender-based censorship is much broader, more pervasive and usually more subtle than official, organized suppression. It is embedded in a range of social mechanisms that silence women's voices, deny the validity of their experience, and exclude them from political discourse. Its effect is to obscure the real conditions of women's lives and the inequity of gender relations that prevents women from exercising their human rights.

Media's role in silencing women

Not surprisingly, the social and cultural practices that result in the silencing of women are echoed, and sometimes amplified, by the media. This has been well documented by research. For instance, every five years since 1995, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has provided a one-day snapshot of 'who makes the news' in the newspapers, radio, and television of more than 70 countries. The 1995 study found that women were only 17% of the world's news subjects – the people who are interviewed or whom the news is about.[6] Ten years later, the figure was 21%.[7]

Regional differences are slight: in 2005 they ranged from a high of 26% in North America to a low of 15% in the Middle East. Everywhere, expert opinion in the news is overwhelmingly male; men are 83% of experts and 86% of spokespersons. Perhaps even more disturbing is that only 34% of so-called 'popular opinion' is provided by women. It is quite extraordinary that the selection of voices to represent ordinary citizens is so radically skewed. There is not a single major news topic in which women outnumber men as newsmakers. Even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it is the male voice that prevails. In 2005 64% of news subjects in these stories were men.

The results across the three studies (1995–2005) are strikingly consistent, and they have been replicated in research carried out over longer time frames. For instance, a one-month study in 12 Southern African countries in 2002 found that 17% of news subjects were women.[8] Of course, the numbers tell only a tiny part of the story. Behind them lies the power structure – social, political, and economic – that itself silences women. News values intertwine with political priorities to portray a particular view of what is important. Issues that are central in women's lives come low down in the scale of what is regarded as newsworthy. The 2005 GMMP found that only 4% of news stories dealt in any way with issues of gender equality or inequality.

While figures like these are important in documenting the systematic silencing of women, it is crucial to look at them in terms of what they tell us about what it means to be a woman, and about women's experience of the world. To take just one example, one of the most pernicious forms of discrimination is the denial of women's authority and leadership. The 2005 GMMP found a gross under-representation of female politicians in the news of almost all the 76 countries studied. Even in New Zealand, where there was a female Prime Minister and where women accounted for 32% of politicians, only 18% of politicians in the news were women.

And when they *are* given space, women in public life are frequently undermined or muted by sexist comment or questioning. No-one who followed the 2008 American presidential campaign will forget the depths of misogyny that welled up against Hillary Clinton.[9] A few years earlier, in Germany we had seen the extraordinary television spectacle of Angela Merkel and Gerhard Schröder – at the time, the leaders of the country's two main political parties – being questioned by a well-known talk-show host about their political lives. But while Schröder was asked about his relationships with Presidents Putin and Bush, Merkel

was asked if she found Brad Pitt attractive and whether her husband helped her to understand men.[10]

And if that seems hard to believe, consider what happened in Israel after the 2009 national elections, when two ultra-Orthodox Jewish newspapers actually altered a photograph of the new Israeli cabinet so as to remove two female ministers. One of the newspapers simply blacked the women out; the other one digitally replaced the women with images of men.[11] It might seem funny if it were not so completely tragic.

We need to understand these different expressions of unwillingness to accept women as autonomous political subjects, and the pervasive definition of women as deviant objects within a masculinist world, as a very specific, gender-based barrier to women's exercise of their communication rights.

There are numerous ways in which gender-based censorship obscures the real conditions of women's lives. One of them is by making it difficult, dangerous or impossible to voice issues that threaten to reveal the extent to which women are devalued by the State. Again, the 2005 GMMP found that only 1% of news stories dealt with human rights and women's rights, and only 1% with gender-based violence. Why is there such silence on these issues?

For instance, UNICEF estimates that every minute a woman dies from complications in pregnancy and childbirth.[12] Yet in July 2009, Chansa Kabwela, news editor of Zambia's biggest-selling newspaper *The Post*, was arrested after she distributed pictures of a woman giving birth without medical assistance, during a strike by health workers. The pictures were not published. They were simply sent to a small group of government ministers and NGOs. In a case brought against her by the State, Kabwela was accused of circulating obscene material and pornography.[13]

Women are in 'double jeopardy'

When it comes to exposing the State's complicity in real pornography, however, journalists risk even greater consequences. The case of Lydia Cacho who, because of her work in uncovering prostitution and child pornography networks in Mexico, was illegally arrested and has been the target of death threats, defamation suits, and police harassment, is well known internationally. The widespread abduction, rape and murder of women – notorious in countries such as Mexico, Guatemala and Chechnya – go un-investigated by the police and unreported by the media. Human rights journalists and activists who dare to expose these crimes risk the ultimate penalty – death. That was the fate of Natalya Estemirova in Chechnya in July 2009.

Inevitably, activists and journalists who publicly question the conditions of women or who promote women's rights in repressive regimes are particularly threatening to the status quo. For example, when last year the Iranian women's magazine *Zanan* (Woman) was shut down after many years of publication, the reason given was that it was 'publishing information detrimental to society's psychological tranquility'.[14]

With respect to human rights, Amnesty International describes women as being in 'double jeopardy'. It says: 'Discriminated against as women, they are also as likely as men, if not more so, to become victims of human rights violations'.[15] In the same way, we can see women as being in double jeopardy when it comes to communication rights – women's right to information, to speak, to be heard, are violated in quite specific ways *because* they are women.

So any grounded discussion of communication rights that does not speak explicitly – and again, I stress explicitly – about women's communication rights will result in a quite

inadequate analysis of the issues at stake. But we still face an uphill task in bringing feminist analysis, which does speak of women's rights, together with other strands of work and writing on communication rights. In this, as in many other areas of media research, we seem to have two parallel bodies of work in progress. I first wrote about this 25 years ago, in relation to the debates around the New World Information and Communication Order.[16] Today, as far I can see, the situation is not fundamentally different.

I think this is partly due to a lack of familiarity with feminist literature, and a consequent misunderstanding of what feminist media scholarship is actually about. To take just one example: the introduction to an edited collection of papers on international communication published in 2009 – which will certainly be widely read – suggests that what it describes as the 'feminization' of media studies is associated with research into so-called 'softer' topics.[17] No feminist work is included in the collection. However, this is a serious oversight.

For many years feminist media scholarship has been concerned with issues of power, rights, democracy, information flows, policy, technology, political economy and so on, all of which are at the core of international communication studies.[18] Feminist analysis may focus on these issues in a slightly different, perhaps less familiar way. But because of this different focus, feminist scholarship has the potential to expand our critiques and our understanding of the issues that media and communication research tries to explain, and the world that many of us would like to change. As such, it deserves the attention of all critical media scholars, across all disciplines.

Taking women's lives seriously

Observations from two very different but equally thoughtful and thought-provoking feminist scholars should illustrate my point. Though neither of them works specifically in the field of media and communication, each can contribute to the way we might think about framing our research.

Cynthia Enloe writes on international politics and security. In her book *Globalization and Militarism* she urges us to 'take women's lives seriously'. Unless one does this, she says, one cannot reliably explain why the international system and what she calls globalized militarism work the way they do.[19] 'Taking women's lives seriously' may seem deceptively simple and obvious. In fact it requires a radical re-think in the way many of us approach problems and formulate research questions.

Catharine MacKinnon is a lawyer whose work focuses on pornography, violence against women, and international law. In her essay 'Are Women Human?', published in 1999 as part of a collection to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, she analyses the failure of the Declaration to address the distinctive ways in which women are deprived of human rights, and its failure to understand these as a deprivation of humanity.

She goes on: 'It is hard to see, in [the Declaration's] vision of humanity, a woman's face. The world needs to see women as human.'[20] Her assertion may seem over-charged, or provocative. But is not the sentiment exactly that of the Kenyan village women whose lives were changed by their community radio station?

To be seen as real human beings, women's lives need to be taken seriously. If we remember this in our research I believe we will bring a sharper spotlight onto the specific, gender-based obstacles that must be attended to if women are to exercise their human and communication rights.

Notes

1. This paper is based on the author's presentation at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference, *Human Rights and Communication*, Mexico City, 21-24 July 2009.
2. Birgitte Jallov. *Impact assessment of East African Community Project 2000-2006. Report from Radio Mang'elete, Kenya, and selected communities*. Stockholm: SIDA, 2007.
3. See United Nations. *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women*. Report of the Secretary General. A/61/122/Add. 1 , 2006; para. 33.
4. Meredith Tax et al. *The Power of the Word: Culture, Censorship and Voice*. New York: Women's WORLD (Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development), 1995; p. 23.
5. See for example Article 19. *Yemen: Freedom of Expression in Peril*. London: Article 19, 2008; pp. 28-30.
6. MediaWatch. *Women's Participation in the News: Global Media Monitoring Project*. Toronto: MediaWatch, 1995.
7. Margaret Gallagher. *Who Makes the News? Global Media Monitoring Project 2005*. London: World Association for Christian Communication, 2006.
8. *Gender and Media Baseline Study*. Windhoek/Johannesburg: Media Institute of Southern Africa/Gender Links, 2003.
9. See Amanda Fortini. 'The Feminist Reawakening: Hillary Clinton and the fourth wave', *New York Magazine*, 13 April 2008. http://nymag.com/news/features/46011/. Also the video *Sexism Sells*. New York: Women's Media Center, May 2008. http://www.womensmediacenter.com/sexism_sells.html
10. Video extracts included in *Portraying Politics: A Toolkit on Gender and Television*, chapter 5 'Framing the Message'. Portraying Politics Project Partners, 2006. http://www.portrayingpolitics.net/
11. 'Papers Alter Israel cabinet photo' BBC online news, 3 April 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7982146.stm
12. UNICEF. *Progress for Children: A Report Card on Maternal Mortality*. 2008. http://www.childinfo.org/files/progress_for_children_maternalmortality.pdf
13. 'Zambia prosecutes editor of Post'. BBC online news, 15 July 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8153003.stm

Four months later, the officiating magistrate ruled that the prosecution had failed to establish that the photographs were obscene, and that Kabwela had no case to answer. See 'Court throws out Chansa Kabwela obscenity case'. IFEX Alert, 17 November 2009. http://www.ifex.org/zambia/2009/11/17/kabwela_vindicated/

14. 'Iran: Leading Women's Magazine Shut Down'. Index on Censorship, 31 January 2008. http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2008/01/iran-leading-women%e2%80%99s-magazine-shut-down/
15. Quoted in Amnesty International. *Women's Human Rights: A Fact Sheet*, 2005.
16. Margaret Gallagher 'Women and NWICO', pp. 33-56 in *Communication for All: New World Information and Communication Order,* edited by Philip Lee. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986; and Margaret Gallagher 'A Feminist Paradigm for Communication Research', pp. 75-87 in *Rethinking Communication. Volume 2: Paradigm Exemplars*, edited by Brenda Dervin et al. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989.
17. Daya Kishan Thussu 'Introduction' in *Internationalizing Media Studies*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussu. London: Routledge, 2009, p. 2.
18. References to, and examples of, much of this work can be found in *Feminist Interventions in International Communication*, edited by Katharine Sarikakis and Leslie Regan Shade. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.
19. Cynthia Enloe. *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
20. Catharine MacKinnon. 'Are Women Human?' In *Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, edited by Barend van der Heijden & Bahia Tahzib-Lie. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1999. Reprinted in Catharine A. MacKinnon *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues.* Harvard: Belknap Press, 2006.

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