

Theme Contemporary gender issues

1. Who makes the news? Promoting gender equality in and through news media

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WOMEN in bikinis posing on a beach, heart attacks and snoring. What's the connection? Well, to most of us none. Yet one Turkish television news report on 1 February 2000 deemed it appropriate to illustrate a serious story on scientific research into the link between heart attacks and snoring in women with footage of scantily clad women posing on a beach! It is stories like these that have come under the microscope in three international media monitoring projects over the last 10 years. When the first Global Media Monitoring Project (or GMMP as it has come to be known) was conducted in 1995, few of those involved could have imagined that it would develop in the way that it went on to do. Ten years later, with the third such project now complete, the enormous significance of this international initiative is clear. These three projects constitute the most extensive global research of gender in news media ever undertaken and as such they provide an enlightening example of the importance of media monitoring as a tool for change.

Until 1995 no global media monitoring initiative had ever been attempted. The initial inspiration for GMMP was the concern of women activists to bring the issue of media accountability to the forefront of the debate on gender inequalities. Its subsequent implementation was guided by the concern of researchers to ensure comparable and accurate analysis of data collected in

different settings by different individuals—many of whom had no previous experience of research. The aim was to give a global overview that went beyond the findings of specific local or even national studies, and to provide a reliable picture of women's presence in the news right around the world. Each time, hundreds of volunteers in more than 70 countries took part in the international day of monitoring. Women and men from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe monitored the day's news on radio, television and in print. And each time, the day was marked by tremendous excitement and solidarity among participating groups linked only by email and a common task. In 2000, for example, the monitoring group from China emailed to say how pleased they were to be included 'in this historic event' and a volunteer in Kenya captured the mood of the day when she said: 'I can't believe I am having so much fun here in Kenya, knowing that people are out there, doing the same thing.' By monitoring the news media in a systematic, coordinated way, groups worldwide have regularly documented the nature and scale of women's exclusion from the world's news media. The data are solid. The evidence is irrefutable.

On 18 January 1995, women made up just 17 percent of the news subjects monitored on the world's radio, television and newspapers. Ten years on, on 16 February 2005, women in the world's media were found to be just 21 percent of the news subjects monitored. In the Pacific region, the representation of women as news subjects was a little better. There, 26 percent of news subjects on television, radio and in newspapers were women but even this figure does not come close to the approximately 52 percent of the population that are women.

As the French monitors reflected after completing the monitoring in 2000: 'The coding results reinforced the impression that the media allow very little space for women ... this raises the question of what is news, what makes the news, and why.'

Although women are never the majority featured in any news topic, GMMP demonstrates that women are more likely to be found in stories about the arts, entertainment and celebrity news (28 percent in 2005). They are least likely to be the news subjects in stories about economics (20 percent in 2005) and politics (14 percent in 2005). Such news topics are, of course, dominated by men. Women in the news are also much more likely to be identified by their marital or family status—as the wife of, mother of or daughter of a man. In 2005, 17 percent of women were described in this way compared with 5 percent of men. As newsmakers, women are also under-represented in

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professional categories such as law (18 percent), business (12 percent) and politics (12 percent). In reality, women's share of these occupations is higher. GMMP also shows that while, in general terms, victims are common currency in news, women are more than twice as likely as men to be identified as victims. What we see then, is that even when women do feature in the news, they are relegated to 'soft' news and portrayed in biased and stereotyped ways—as victims, wives, mothers and daughters.

While there has been a steady increase in the percentage of news items reported by women from 28 percent in 1995, to 31 percent in 2000, reaching 37 percent in 2005, women are still under-represented as reporters. There is also a gender division of labour in the way that stories are assigned to female and male reporters. Overall, male journalists report at the so-called 'hard' or 'serious' end of the news spectrum such as politics and government. Female journalists are more likely to work on the so-called 'soft' stories such as social and legal issues (40 percent reported by women in 2005).

GMMP also provides us with information on women working in the media. Not only are women underrepresented as reporters (women made up only 31 percent of reporters monitored in 2000), but there is also a gender division of labour in the way that stories are assigned to female and male reporters. 'Soft' issues like culture and the arts are mainly consigned to women media practitioners, whereas 'hard' and therefore 'serious' issues like finance, economics and politics are more likely to be within the purview of their male counterparts.

Unfortunately, GMMP 2005 confirms the findings of earlier GMMP studies and countless other research findings that the marginalisation of women in news media is still very much a reality. Despite this, in some parts of the world there is a perception that the issue of gender portrayal in the media is outdated, that things have changed for the better, and that the problems highlighted during the 1970s and 1980s have been solved.

The GMMP data provide a periodic, persistent reminder that in fact very little has changed; yet this is not for want of effort by gender and communication groups worldwide. The methodology and results of GMMP have been used in a myriad of ways by gender and communication groups around the world. GMMP has provided a research instrument that has been easily applied in subsequent monitoring at both the local and international level. GMMP has also been used extensively for media literacy work and many monitoring groups have also reported that taking part in GMMP has been a process of

conscientisation. As the French monitoring group in 2000 explained, GMMP 'changed the way we "read" the media ... and it will help us to show other journalists how and why things need to change'.

Perhaps most importantly, GMMP is also a successful actualisation of the links that media monitoring presupposes between research, informed citizenship and action. As Gloria Bonder, coordinator of the monitoring effort in Latin America in 1995, has observed:

The results (of GMMP) were not surprising but the insight was that monitoring is a wonderful technique and it's easy enough that we can all do it...and monitoring is a project on the political side, because it's not just the collecting of data—it's the process of involving the audience in the process of acting to change women's images in the media. We have discussed and complained in the past, but this systematic methodology provides proof of the problem and involves people in education and citizens' rights.

The promotion of media literacy and gender awareness through media monitoring has always been an important aim of the GMMP. However, its overriding goal is to change media output. With that in mind, groups in many different countries have also used the GMMP results to launch dialogue with media practitioners and policy-makers. The data have proven invaluable in opening up creative discussion about the accepted routines and practices in media production, about how particular journalistic decisions result in specific patterns of gender imbalance, and about how alternative choices and approaches could lead to a fairer, more balanced gender portrayal.

Many individual strategies have brought results. In Australia and Canada the data have been used in advocacy interventions aimed at fair gender portrayal; in Uruguay, meetings with editorial staffs have resulted in changes to both content and editorial policy. In Jamaica, the assistant executive director of the Broadcasting Commission described GMMP as containing 'extremely useful information to the commission's work, particularly in the formulation and implementation of content standards for gender portrayals in the Jamaican electronic mass media'. The list could go on. But the important point is that the GMMP has allowed these and other groups around the world to move beyond one-sided complaints *about* the media to constructive dialogue *with* the media. As a tool for change, the strength of GMMP lies in the fact that it

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provides hard facts and figures, the staple food of journalists and programme makers. In discussions about what is wrong with, or missing from, the pictures of the world we get from media content, hard data—together with concrete examples—reaches media professionals with an immediacy never achieved by theory or abstract argument. This is what media monitoring, and particularly GMMP, is about.

The experience of the past 30 years of gender and media campaigning has shown that criticism of media content creates a lack of trust and interest on the part of media professionals. Interaction and dialogue between gender specialists and media professionals is the only way forward. And it is a dialogue which is not simply about trying to get certain issues or events covered in the media, but working to promote an entire perspective, a gender vision within the media. This dialogue was recently strengthened with the first-ever global campaign on gender representation in the news media. *Who Makes the News? Three weeks of Global Action on Gender and the Media* saw the participation of groups in more than 50 countries and resulted in unprecedented levels of media engagement with the issues that GMMP highlights (www.whomakesthenews.org). This is only the beginning and while only small gains in changing media representation of gender have resulted from GMMP so far, if these gains spring from an awareness that current representations of gender in the news are something to be questioned, rather than taken for granted, they have the potential to be transformative (Gallagher, 2001, p. 191).

Ultimately, what is actually required, is a wide-scale social and political transformation, in which women's rights—and particularly women's communication rights—are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society at large and by the media. And while this will not happen overnight, GMMP is perhaps one step closer to such a transformation.

Reference

Gallagher, M. (2001). *Gender setting: New agendas for media monitoring and advocacy*. London, UK: Zed Books.

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