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(Re)producing cultural narratives on women in public affairs programmes in Uganda

ABSTRACT

Ugandan women have made tremendous strides in public life, and hold strategic positions in politics and policy-making. This increased participation in public life is attributed to Uganda's focused pro-women constitution and affirmative action policy. In spite of this progress, women's visibility and voice remain limited in public affairs programming in Uganda. The article examines how mass media reproduce cultural narratives that affect women in Uganda. It is part of a larger study on representation, interaction and engagement of women and broadcast media in Uganda. It is framed within critical theory, in particular feminist thought, cultural studies and public sphere theory. The research is conducted using a multi-method approach that encompasses case study design, content analysis and grounded theory. The findings suggest that the media reproduce cultural narratives through programming that mirror traditional society view of women and exclude women's political and public narratives. The interactive and participatory public affairs programming is increasingly important for democratic participation. While men actively engage with such programming, women have failed to

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utilize it for the mobilization of women, reconstruction of gender stereotypes and producing new argumentation that challenge problematic cultural narratives that dominate media and society.

BACKGROUND

With the adoption of the 1995 constitution (GoU 1995), many of the building blocks for gender equality and women's empowerment had been laid. Affirmative action, creation of bureaucratic institutions for women and a gender policy enabled progress. Women played key roles in ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment were brought onto the decision-making table (Tripp 2000). Women made demands on government that were largely met and embedded in the constitution. By the time of data collection in 2015, women controlled 54 per cent of the budget as Figure 1 indicates, a remarkable progress.

Despite this impressive progress for women in politics and policy-making, gender equality and women's empowerment remains a far distant dream for the majority of Ugandan women. Pockets of success such as the increased number of women in politics are shadowed by slow progress in others. The relevance of women in parliament is questioned and review of affirmative action demanded. One of the challenges to women's empowerment remains the media portrayal of women in politics (Tamale 1999) and development (Nassanga 1997).

The mass media, in particular broadcast media also experienced exponential growth due to liberalization in the early 1990s. The postal, broadcasting and telecommunications annual market and industry report 2016–17 indicates that the numbers grew from one radio and television station in 1990



Figure 1: A 13 June 2015 article suggesting women are more powerful in government.

to 275 FM radio stations in June 2017; 30 operational Digital Terrestrial Free to Air Television; one (1) cable television; four (4) operational digital satellite TV stations and two (2) operational Digital Terrestrial television stations (UCC 2017).

The consequence of this growth is innovative interactive programming in public affairs like political talk shows, which elevated most of radio and television stations to democratic spaces (Mwesige 2009). There is little doubt that 'members of the general public are appearing on radio and television to debate and discuss issues of the day' (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 1). However, concerns about quality (Kibazo and Kanaabi 2007) and fragmentation with many FM stations competing for audiences in a small economy (Kaija 2013) remain. For this article, the concern is the limited visibility and voice of women on public affairs programmes.

The role of media was projected by the Beijing Platform of Action (UN 1995) as key in order to realize progress on gender equality and women's empowerment. The manner in which issues relevant to women are framed and the way that those active in public life are represented may play crucial roles in the formation of public opinion in general and the mobilization of women voters in particular (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996). Yet, the portrayal of women in the Ugandan media is largely negative (UMWA 2016) and disempowering. This negative portrayal is in much of African media, including South Africa where Daniels et al. (2018) note that the industry has changed and more women are entering senior roles but acknowledge that sexism, racism and male chauvinism will not end in our lifetime. In Uganda, Kaija (2013) makes similar observations in explaining why the Ugandan media is nearing gender parity, but women are still leaving the newsroom.

Nevertheless, 'if mass media form part of the apparatus through which particular gender roles and attributes are defined and assigned, [...] media will also be a site for negotiating changes in those definitions' (Sakr 2004: 4). These views provide the media with a strong responsibility to mobilize women and redefine their role in society. This article contributes to the debate by discussing how the mass media in Uganda reproduce cultural narratives on women through public affairs programming and what needs to be done.

CRITICAL THEORY: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN MASS MEDIA

Critical tradition 'conceptualizes communication as discursive reflection that is, discourse that freely reflects on the assumptions that may be unexamined habits, ideological beliefs, and relations of power' (Craig and Muller 2007: 425). It is based on the idea that 'authentic communication occurs only in a process of discursive reflection that moves towards a transcendence that can never really be fully and finally achieved-but the reflective process itself is progressively emancipatory' (Craig 1999: 147). Critical theory thus appeals to commonplace values of freedom, equality and reason, and that it challenges many of our commonplace assumptions about what is reasonable (Craig 1999).

The choice of critical theory is premised on their interconnections of feminism, cultural studies and the public sphere. Susan Okin (1999) recognizes the unavoidable conflict between the ideals of gender equality and cultural recognition while Monica Mookherjee (2005) identifies the need for equal consideration in the public sphere and for cultural practices to remain consistent with equal consideration. This submission integrates gender, culture and the public sphere within critical theory, and expands the understanding of women and media.

Audrey Gadzekpo (2009: 78) points to the absence of gender and media courses in a lot of African mass media schools and departments and in gender/women studies departments as a challenge. Others contend that the male-dominated media

is influenced by patriarchy and a conduit for perpetuating gender subordination, oppression and ideological power (Tamale 1999; Kabuchu 1992). Still, Margaret Gallaghers recognizes that ‘the media are potentially powerful agents of socialisation and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviours, encouraging stereotypes’ (Gallagher 1979: 3).

While it is true that some achievement is reflected in changes the media industry has experienced in terms of content focused on women, stronger public consciousness of feminism and more women entering the media profession (Byerly and Ross 2006), women expected more as Audrey Gadzekpo explains:

With media freedoms and pluralism, and the rebirth of civil society, there came the expectation that women would become more visible in the media as employees, as decision makers, as subjects of the news and as newsmakers. There was also the expectation that media content would be more sensitive and respectful of women and would foster more balanced, less stereotyped and less sexist gender images. It was hoped that the proliferation of media outlets would mean that more women would have access to the media and consequently would be able to participate more fully in public discourses and debates.

(Gadzekpo 2009: 73)

Despite these expectations, there have been some disappointments. Gorreti Nassanga points out that ‘the presence of media does not imply that everybody utilises it, so it is important to examine the access and engagement in citizens’ media’ (Nassanga 2009: 53). It is further acknowledged that, while the proliferation of broadcast media that transmit in the indigenous languages may improve people’s chances of participation in public debate through the media, it also may reduce the chances of the broadcast media enhancing a shared public sphere (Chibita 2009: 302). This could partly explain women’s absence in public affairs.

The major criticism of the critical paradigm is that it imposes an interpretive frame, and fails to appreciate local meanings, while imposing dogmatic ideology (Craig 1999). Sceptics opine that the most useful contribution of critical theory aside from its obvious relevance to the discourse of social injustice and change is to cultivate a deeper appreciation of discursive reflection. Nancy Fraser (1990) takes issue with the exclusionary nature of the public sphere, arguing for the need to take a harder, more critical look at the terms ‘private’ and ‘public’ which are powerful terms frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views and topics and to valorize others. Moreover, ‘all these processes – the participation of women in parliamentary politics, the feminist struggle over the political, the general changes in political culture – cannot be understood without examining the media’s role’ (Sreberny and van Zoonen 2000: 3).

In order to address these criticisms, the ‘issues of women’s employment, position, status, representation, portrayal, access to and participation in the media, and these remain evaluative indicators of progress or the lack thereof in contemporary African media’ (Gadzekpo 2009: 72). This is crucial because ‘the ways in which women are represented on and in broadcast media send important messages to the public about women’s place, women’s role, and women’s lives’ (Ross 2004: 62). Certainly, the absence of women in public affairs programming sends important messages to the public about women’s role in public life.

These debates do not focus on the nature and attitudes of media content producers of public affairs programmes, which this study brings into the debate. This article contributes to the debate on media and women by examining one of the

specific ways media rather than facilitate may frustrate women's participation in public life, hinder progress for gender equality and women's empowerment, by reproducing cultural narratives in public affairs programmes. Much of the debate has tended to focus on images and portrayal, neglecting the decisions media actors make on a daily basis through gender lenses, that result in the underrepresentation of women, muting women's voices on public affairs programmes and sending signals far from the reality of women in contemporary Uganda.

METHODS

The larger study, a doctoral dissertation research (Maractho 2017), adopted a multidisciplinary and multi-method approach involving content analysis, interviews and participant observations guided by case study design and grounded theory (Charmaz 2008). The study was carried out in three phases: (1) the qualitative research (semi-structured interviews with radio and television staff, and participant observation of audience discussion programmes (participants from the audience engage in discussion); (2) quantitative research (content analysis) of selected public affairs programmes and (3) qualitative (in-depth interviews of women in public life). The analysis was done in four stages of data coding and analysis through: (1) open; (2) focused coding and analysis; (3) analysing and organizing data and (4) theory building through a process of linking codes to concepts to categories to theory. The use of computer-assisted techniques (CATs) like excel and NVivo supported analysis. This article draws from the media segment.

Field research was conducted in Kampala, Uganda's capital city. Four (4) radio stations, four (4) television stations and one (1) online news agency purposively selected. The producer and/or manager of a radio and television station and programme were interviewed. A total of 23 respondents participated in the media segment. One radio programme, one online news agency and nine talk shows were chosen for quantitative content analysis or observation. Media houses selected were Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC), Wavah Broadcasting Television (WBS- not on air by the time of this writing), Nkabi Broadcasting Services (NBS), Nation Television (NTV), Vision Group's X-FM, Central Broadcasting Corporation (CBS), Capital Radio FM, Mama FM and Uganda Radio Network (URN). The stations were chosen to include diverse case types covering ownership and programming dynamics.

WOMEN AND MEDIA IN UGANDA

Current and political affairs programmes of broadcast media in Uganda continue to be dominated by men. The many radio and television stations have all introduced interactive public affairs programming that is open to public participation. While there is a general acknowledgement that the media's coverage of women's issues and portrayal of women have greatly improved (Mukama 2002), visibility of women on public affairs programmes remain minimal and women's voices rare. For a country that has significantly improved women's participation in public life, this is perplexing. In fact, the relevance of women in parliament continue to be questioned. Even the limited visibility and women's presence on public affairs programmes is large as subjects rather than sources. This is depicted in the title of an article in the newspaper as mentioned in Figure 2.

Contrary to the view that women are excluded by a male-dominated media that focuses on sensation, the study revealed that women in public life are disinterested in these programmes, and often reject the invitation to participate. Women in public

office were deemed inaccessible to the media and public. I examine why few women participate in these programmes, thus perpetuating male dominance of public debate and discussion on national issues.

Despite claims that women reject opportunities to participate, the deeper analysis revealed significant evidence that the media is not blameless. Public affairs programming reproduces cultural narratives about women, which in the other areas of public life have been partly addressed by affirmative action. Taken within the context of a media that is largely owned by the private sector, driven by profit and audience perceptions, free of obligations to affirmative action for women, the implications for women’s media participation are huge. Indeed, it was apparent that ‘journalists commonly work with gendered frames to simplify, prioritize and structure narrative flow of events when covering women and men in public life’ (Norris 1997: 6). These gendered lenses also determine who participates (Maratho 2018).



Figure 2: Another 13 June 2015 article questioning the relevance of women MPs.

A THICK DESCRIPTION OF CULTURAL POLITICS IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS Much of the research on gender and the media in Uganda (and elsewhere) has focused on women in politics or portrayal of women in media content, therefore neglecting women’s participation in discursive programmes. Interrogating popular public and political affairs programmes chosen revealed there are very few female presenters/hosts or producers. Subjects of discussion are largely political and controversial (Mwesige 2004). Analysis of areas of public life to which participants belonged, and topics discussed revealed a bias towards politics and the economy, believed to be too difficult for women to engage with in a debate. The narratives of media producers and presenters interviewed reveal the extent to which they may carry cultural lenses reinforcing traditional gender roles. Throughout the interviews, four codes of women’s lack of confidence, competence, credibility and courage emerged as dominant.

The confidence code: The media and politics as the man's domain narrative

It appears that the more women occupy positions of power in Uganda, the more entrenched the idea that some things are not for women have become. More women are now in media according to the interviews, but few engage in political and public affairs which are deemed as no space for women. Women are largely discussed as subjects as Figure 3 shows:

Numerous narratives emerged to explain women's absence. Some narratives were typically anchored in stereotypes. The usual narratives of 'it's a man's domain', and men are naturally gifted, trained or socialized for it emerged. Interestingly, the determinants of participation included issues like the problem in discussion, nature of the programme, the politics of the day, performance of the participants, the role of presenter or producer, the profession of the people, personality and policy of the media house or government



Figure 3: Post-2015 International Women's Day discussion on the Fourth Estate. (Maratho 2017). While the determinants for participation seemed gender neutral and could not explicitly explain the absence of women on public affairs programmes, the narratives that follow are revealing. A female media manager noted that women still think that politics is for men:

I think we have also been brought up in Uganda as women, in that we are not as aggressive as women from other countries [...]. You do some studies and people will tell you that they do not also know that politics is also for women. [...] Actually I am doing an annual report and these are women saying, 'for me, I never thought I would talk on radio, *it's only politicians who talk on radio*, people who have money who can talk on radio'.

(Sen 2015, original emphasis)

A producer of another popular programme argued that given his experience, he believed God did not create women for public affairs, and that politics is not a game of women:

[...] naturally when God was creating us, he didn't make women to be into public affairs. But when it comes to fashion [...] they participate fully. Even if you go down and ask yourself how many women are involved in public affairs, very few, why? It's not a game of women.

(Wal 2015, original emphasis)

A host of another programme argued that in his experience, women are also naturally shy:

Some women are also naturally shy because for example if I go to the village to investigate the cases, I go and meet all those whose names have been mentioned however far it is. So, if I go to a lady and enquire about the issue, they will tell it when they are in a group but when you focus on a particular person and ask them, they will say 'no, no, no, no...'. So the moment you turn the microphone and ask them to tell you more about what happened, 'no, no, no, no', so, she doesn't, but some do. Now another issue is about fear, if someone is married, she fears that if her husband finds out that she was on television that can bring problems.

(Sek 2015, original emphasis)

By using the word 'naturally', these producers saw no possibility that women could be good politicians, just notable exceptions. These narratives suggest that women are simple-minded, focused on the less serious issues of entertainment and fashion. As if that is not enough, some of the female presenters, said men are easy to deal with, have confidence and that there are things that men do better. What one female talk show host said represent this view:

Men are just easy to deal with, they are more cooperative, and they are more open, compared to ladies. There are things that ladies are not ready to talk about. Sometimes you want someone to explain things using technical terms but ladies will run away from them [...]. You will find most of the presenters are women, most of the people in the technical team are men. You enter control rooms and you find ten men, one lady, or five men and one lady, [...] I don't know if it is just my perception but there are things that men do better than ladies. We've had experiences even when you go to the field, and you want to talk to the market vendors, ladies see cameras and they run away. They will not even allow you to take their pictures. If you manage to get five men to talk, if you manage to get just one lady, for gender balance, then you are lucky.

(Aty 2015, original emphasis)

When I told the above respondent that my observation of fifteen segments of her programme indicated only one woman appeared, she was shocked and had been unaware. I also noted that female journalists included themselves in this judgement of women lacking confidence as this response represents the others:

[...] bosses do not want to employ women because women we are slow [...] and then some have no confidence in what they are doing. You may find someone fears to ask a question if she wants to get a story, or she wants to get information from someone. But for men at least for them they can ask, and pick what they want, but we women fear [...] going out there in the field, at least if you put on a trouser you can move very fast, at least you can get a story very fast, but you may find like I don't put on trousers.

I was surprised by her strong belief that it is difficult for women to carry out the same roles as men. Her submission suggests, women carry these cultural narratives too. The confidence code embedded with the fear factor was considered a big issue for participation in public affairs. The unanswered question for me remained, if producers and presenters strongly believe that women are not meant to be in politics, have no confidence to debate and are difficult to deal with, how can they involve women in their programmes?

The competence code: Women cannot manage public affairs narrative

Some respondents insisted that women hold those positions as a result of affirmative action and often ill-fitted to manage. They saw women as not worthy of playing key public roles. Others even suggested that some positions should not be given to women of child-bearing age as they struggle to perform. These perceptions are rooted in culture, as this producer suggests:

I have been in this industry for five years but you find the other problem with other women in Parliament, you find most of them who are in Parliament, it's their first time to be in Parliament and most of them it's their first time to be in a group of people and you find sometime the language barrier also brings a problem.

(Wal 2015)

I asked the respondent what he meant by language barrier. His response suggested that perhaps only 2 per cent of women in Parliament could express themselves in public, even though they could write. He attributed their success in the elections to their use of indigenous languages during the campaigns. He justified his claim by pointing out that many women had never spoken since joining Parliament; so how can they participate in a debate on television?

Even guests invited to programmes, as this anecdote demonstrates, carry on the view of women as not capable of handling public affairs narrated to me by a former female talk show host:

There was a former minister who passed on sometime back. It had to do with world food day. When he saw me, he threw it straight in my face and said, 'what does this little girl know? *How can you give us nobody to interview us?*' in the presence of the person from World Food Program who was going to be on the same platform as him. I felt small and stepped out of the visitor's lounge. But his secretary told me, 'please never mind him, he always seems to be intimidating. Please do not mind him'. What I did is, I went and told the producer what had happened and my producer then said, 'we cannot make any changes, I know you can pull it off'. [...] Because of the questions I had prepared, he didn't know that I listen a lot and I pick up a follow up question from the conversation I am having, [...] So I got him off guard. I didn't intend but for me it was learning, and I was enjoying the topic we were discussing. So when I ask him a question, he says 'maybe this question my colleague should be able to respond to it'. Now the gentleman from World Food Program was able to respond. Then midway the show, he pats me on the back and says 'very good moderator'. This was live on air. I left feeling that I needed to push harder, and I could do better.

(Mus 2015, original emphasis)

In the above story, the host proved her capability. The minister was surprised by her knowledge and had not expected it. Perhaps he had only seen male talk show host. The issue of competence involved performance. It was argued that the majority of women perform poorly on programmes, making it unnecessary to invite them again. A female presenter had this to say:

There are males that will come here, the first two seconds they will introduce themselves and then they are fine, they are in place. *Women will take slightly longer to settle in and address whatever issues.* In most cases the first few minutes they will be beating around the bush, you will be guiding them, you will be spending more time guiding them, because you will be guiding them, this is what I want you to address. [...] You know they are studying the environment. I think most times they are also thinking, the person listening out there, my colleague.

(Lum 2015, original emphasis)

Many ministers and some politicians were deemed poor discussants, superficial although few were considered good, who in turn are inaccessible. Even where they have appeared, it was very hard work getting them, with exceptions being those in civil society. One show host said:

The Ugandan structure is there to enable women to engage in politics. The vehicle is there. But I *sometimes have hard work getting a woman politician to appear onto the show*, getting a minister who is a woman to appear on the show is nearly impossible.

(Sem 2015, original emphasis)

The competence code also implied that performance in terms of the roles they play in public life were important determinants of participation. Being seen to perform well as a minister, executive officer and other public roles were crucial. The question remained, if men and women who produce and present talk shows deeply believe that women are not competent, how can they engage women in important discussion of national matters? It seems that while the public affairs domain has been neglected in terms of research, the perception and attitudes of those involved in their production do more to reproduce the cultural narratives than the actual content.

The credibility code: The most credible guest is a man narrative I found out that women were considered boring, with very few deemed interesting because of their personalities. I asked a producer, after an interview if he would consider inviting me for his current affairs programme. He firmly said no. Intrigued, I asked why not. He told me that I would be very boring. They want people who can pull the crowd. At least six people I interviewed told me that the most credible guest is a man because they will show up when they accept to come, and they are not boring like most women. Some even took it further to argue that it was difficult to rely on women because they are busy with children. A host suggests:

Sincerely since I started I do not remember having received any phone call from a lady. At that time, I am thinking maybe that is when *women are busy with the children.*

This was reinforced by a male show host, who argued that the mother is the matriarch at home:

I don't have to pick up at school usually. And if I pick from school and drop, I won't have to tuck them. I don't have homework to do, all those – you have the women, being fair really. My friend [...] usually tells me, she leaves parliament, she is racing to Entebbe road and she needs to see her children before they go to bed and I want her on television for a talk show that begins after the prime news, 10:00 pm. She says, 'I do not think I am being fair to my children'. So it's very unlikely that during the school time, you will have her, same as the 7 o'clock show on radio. Somehow the time that – while a lot of men are rushing to the bars and sports clubs, the women will be in the wheel driving home or racing home and this is the nature of our society. Somehow, *the mother is the matriarch at home and she needs to go there and watch over.*

(Kib 2015, original emphasis)

The respondent was very sympathetic to women, and thought it was not fair to expect female politicians to be on a talk show that begins at 7 p.m. or 10 p.m. A male programme manager also doubted the credibility of women, claiming that they just have too many excuses, often small issues that men do not bother with like picking children from school. For example:

Women will have many more excuses than men. Of course the excuses will not be connected to what they are doing. They make up excuses: 'I am supposed to be in a constituency, I am supposed to be doing this and that. Then others, the time you want to call them to appear on a show, *they are picking children from school.*

(Kaz 2015, original emphasis)

The women as mothers were a huge part of the narratives. They argued that men did not bother with small things that women left their huge public responsibilities for. Some respondents suggested that while women wish to take public roles, they remain focused on family and unprepared for the price of being leaders. Some asserted that public life is messy; women may excel in the corporate world but not in politics and policy-making, where they tend to get overwhelmed. Women reinforced these otherwise stereotypical public perceptions. Producers argued that it is hard work getting women as this short story illustrates:

It was on Women's Day, when I went to FAWE [Forum for African Women Educationalists]. We were looking for women to talk about women's day. I picked FAWE as a women's organization. I reached at the reception, introduced myself. I asked the lady who was there at the reception, she said the executive director could not see me. I told her what I wanted. All I wanted was information. I was offering space [...] platform for them to speak. She said 'no' she cannot speak. So I left my card. I told her to call me when she has time. [...] We are heading for another women's day, she has never called me. So how do I go back to FAWE? How do I pick the courage to go to such an institution? Because even us as media we want something fast, quick, and convenient and easy for me. [...] *The media wants women.* Even as you plan a programme, you feel you need to balance, whether it is a political programme, community programme, any programme – at the back of your

mind you feel women's voices should be there, at whatever age, whether they are young people, children, you have it at the back of your mind, that you need to balance your gender. But the issue is how do you balance when the person does not want to be favoured?

(Nde 2015, original emphasis)

Almost every respondent had a narrative about women refusing to participate. This has led to the general conclusion that women do not want to be in public affairs discussion even as managers of public affairs. Media professionals then look for the easy way out, to men whom they think are always ready to take the opportunity.

It is some of these stories that present the paradox of participation. FAWA has done tremendous work in empowering girls in Uganda through education, yet an individual in office at the time was not responsive to media, creating perception of lack of credibility. There is more to women and media engagement than say competence. Just because a woman does not wish to participate, it does not mean they are incompetent, incredible or lack confidence and courage.

The courage code: Women want power without the price narrative Some respondents argued that women prefer to play it safe and not many women have got the courage to participate in a political debate. Many women are given opportunities to participate but they decline because they do not have courage. The courage code implies that women are given the opportunity to participate but they decline. A producer had this to say:

Most women also refuse to come for the shows. [...] Sometimes they fear and they ask, 'Who am I with?' and when you tell them, they say, 'No, I won't manage' but they first ask you either about the topic or the guest and then they don't come. I don't know whether they fear debating with men.

(Zen 2015)

It is suggested here that women may fear debating with men and the fear of participation is largely attributed to lack of courage and women's preference to play it safe, as this female media manager explains:

What I think is that *women prefer to play it safe*, because you will find not very many women are strongly participating in the hard politics. They want things that are a little bit simple and you know that you have played it safe. But getting into it is really hard. They feel it's like the men's domain. So, *not many women have got the courage* [...] that has taken the courage to even step into that area. If you look at some of the breakfast shows that are running right now, you will get to realize that if there is a woman in that show, in the segment where you have the hard talk, she is just like a filler, a pretty face seated there. She cannot say much but will probably add limp onto what the gentleman is saying. When the conversation tries to get deeper, then you get to realize she is *not informed*.

(Mus 2015, original emphasis)

The narrative above suggests that women's performance is weak. Most of these claims have in the past been treated as mere stereotypes. 'Stereotyping means evaluating individuals on the basis of characteristics assumed to be shared by social groups, irrespective of the individual's personal qualities, abilities or experiences'

(Norris 1997: 8). It is possible some women do not have courage, but I found that they quickly were generalized as a characteristic of women. These conversations depict how these stereotypes are fuelled and dominate the narratives. I now turn to discussing why women refuse and some of the underlying issues.

WHY WOMEN REFUSE TO PARTICIPATE: DECODING THE PERCEPTIONS

Much of the narratives above were steeped in cultural values. One female journalist wondered how female politicians stand before thousands of voters and beg for votes, but are afraid of facing one camera. Another asked why they kneel for rather than tell voters what they can do. Women were accused of not effectively participating in parliament and being knowledgeable, which is mirrored in the media. The narratives challenge the claim that capable women are everywhere, as respondents questioned the recycling of the same women in authority. A few narratives shed light on this. It was explained that many women are already stigmatized and do not wish to engage with the media that could bring them down. A respondent argued that:

Women are always being put in the negative. You are looking into them if they are having extramarital affairs, whether they are sleeping with so and so. *Sometimes we stigmatise them.* So by the time you call her to come, already she is stigmatised. [...] How do you bring the same woman to talk serious issues? I think all those things somehow, though we think they do not impact on us, even if you are not doing it at the end of the day, all women are somehow affected in one way or the other. *They keep bringing us down, especially in the entertainment side, women have chosen to really water down women.*

(Nde 2015, original emphasis)

A tradition of negative portrayal of women seems to be at the heart of this refusal of women to participate. More so, women are placed in traditional roles when those in public life have already outlived those roles as expressed by one woman involved in education:

There is a sense in which they [media] use the traditional modes of understanding of a woman to write their stories. And the traditional mode is that she is a wife, she has to be faithful, she has to be beautiful. [...] The challenge is, most of the women who are in public life have already outlived those traditional roles and traditional presentation of a woman. So they will not auger well with the media. Infact they will repel. They will repel it. And that is why when they are reporting about them, they report – that’s my analysis now – from the wrath point of view. And by the wrath point of view, I mean from the negative point of view.

(Nab 2015, original emphasis)

While much of the narratives have blamed women, it is clear that the mindset of those in media and their perception of women is a problem. By virtue of positions of these women, they are very busy. Their non-participation on talk shows cannot be taken as being unserious. The media fuels it. One presenter argued that the media does not do enough to reach out to women:

As a society we are fixated on a smaller number of women. There are very many smart women out there, it’s just that they have not been given a chance.

So every time you want to talk about women emancipation, you think of Miria Matembe, every time you want to talk about women in business, you have Maggie Kigozi, you think about women in business, you are going for Gordon Wavamunno's wife, so our specimen is this small [holds index finger and thumb together]. And so we suffer from over exposure, and Jenny is the one that over appears in all interviews in television and radio.

(Lum 2015)

The issue of overexposure I observed from content analysis as real. Specific women were hosted from one television station to another. Another issue was some cracks in the women's movement and the Museveni's regime creating fear in women as a female manager noted:

People have moved on, people are not cooperative, people think they know better than others, people want money and then *Museveni's issues come into the women's movement*, people are not willing to speak. 'If I speak, they will start investigating me' and all those issues.

(Sen 2015, original emphasis)

The problem, some respondents argued, is much deeper than culture but is rooted in politics, the women's movement and the media a reflection of it all. An academic had this to say:

When there are a few women inserted into this stream, these people really end up – it's like you are given a trophy, you are given a gesture that 'well you are good enough to come and partake of what we do and be part of us'. And I think when we enter there and become part of the decision making body, we really lose something about the jacket we wear to enter there.

(Dip 2015, original emphasis)

Women are not free to speak, once they join the decision-making body. But some women also placed the blame directly on media. Questions were raised about the possibility of men being interested in inviting women to participate. One presenter explains:

It is the media, and *I will blame the media* for that because, we are the people that make people, *we are the people that introduce these people to the public*. So Emilly [researcher] will get all these speaking events and opportunities because that is the person that is invited to every radio station.

(Lum 2015, original emphasis)

It was clear that the talk show culture targets the most powerful person. The media was also blamed for prioritizing men in selection of newsworthy sources. One news editor said:

Most of *the media houses always quote men first*, then women say something. I can give an example, like when Besigye¹ is there and Ingrid Turinawe is there, you find that Besigye has said something and Ingrid has also said something, but the following day in the newspaper, or television you will just see Besigye, leaving out Turinawe.

(Nas 2015, original emphasis)

The media is to blame narrative was challenged by some, who argued that the media is a mirror of society. For this group, there is no possibility that the media is not doing enough:

You don't blame the press

because I don't think the press manufacture s; they bring out what you are. If you are harsh, it brings you the way you are and that is why I sometimes blame the politicians. They make mistakes and when the press brings them out, and then they start

blaming us that we are bad and that we are destroying them.

(Kaw 2015, original emphasis)

1. Former president of opposition party Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and four-time presidential candidate. Ingrid Turinawe is the former head of women's league in the same party.

The media it was argued, reflects women's participation elsewhere as this producer put it:

They have not come up in society to be that articulate, to be knowledgeable, to be assertive, to watch the media, *even when they go up, they are not that confident*, and of course in media we look for people that will give us the content that we want.

(Nde 2015, original emphasis)

These were some of the many narratives that depicted the extent to which women are viewed through cultural lens. While the media may be a mirror of society, one must ask, what does the market want to hear? Is there any possibility the mirror is broken and displaying distorted images? How come much of the progress women have made in public life is not reflected in the presentation of public affairs on radio and television? Could the broken mirror be the cultural lenses that producers and presenters, male or female carry every day? The assumption that interactive programmes are more inclusive and likely to bypass stringent gatekeeping practices (Opoku-Mensah 2001) in theory becomes irrelevant in the face of talk shows whose gatekeepers' perception place women in the private rather than public sphere. These narratives highlight barriers for women's participation in public affairs programmes.

SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

There were three major issues, that women reject opportunities to participate according to media respondents, the extent to which many of the women in public life were despised and disapproved of, despite being qualified, and the culturally embedded views of respondents. Looking closely at the text, deeply entrenched cultural narratives emerge. The way society views women have not changed much, and women largely act in conformity with cultural expectations. I pulled out these raw narratives to demonstrate how media reproduce cultural narratives. It is up to the reader to make sense of them.

These narratives challenge the otherwise dominant narrative that women in Uganda have made it, and with the media occasionally showcasing 'successful' women's profiles. These narratives suggest though, there is a lot of work to be done in changing the image of women in society, and the media should be a place to start reconstruction of gendered perceptions. There are many women out there doing great work, even among politicians, which emerged during interviews with women in the final phase. Yet, the perception of women remains to the contrary. And, this is largely fuelled by the lack of visibility and voice of women in public life on the media, and women's lack of meaningful interaction and engagement with media.

women to speak up, and also consciously dealing with the attitudes of those employed, particularly talk show hosts who may not be trained in journalism or lack gender sensitivity. Women in public life on the other hand need to be empowered to engage in public affairs using media.

I hope this article raises some important questions for readers. As long as the focus remains narrow on the media's portrayal of women in media content, the puzzle will remain unsolved.

Discursive programmes are now spaces where voters make an opinion of politicians and important issues of national development that affect citizens happen. Important conversations around media culture should happen. In as far as understanding meaning and power structures within these programmes are concerned, critical theory does support some of the narratives. Media actors bring their cultural lenses, which inform their work, and women respond within cultural expectations. Media policy should be deliberate in addressing sexism, opening spaces for

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